

'Dark Water and Light'

- *Schism, Christendom and Monasticism (1000-1300 CE)*

AT THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

Towards 1000

The golden days in the east were replaced by increasing darkness as one moves west. These were terrible times as the year 1000 approached; days that many, including the church, believed might herald the end of the world:

- The Frankish empire had divided into three and the office of the emperor had disappeared;
- There were civil wars between a myriad of kingdoms; it was said, "Once we had a king now we have kinglets";
- From the south Muslim pirates raided Italy and Provence and from the coast plundered the interior for a century;
- From the north Vikings attacked the Atlantic coastline, sailing up rivers killing, plundering and striking terror wherever they went;
- From the east Hungarian Magyars poured over the Urals, invaded Germany and laid waste areas as far as Burgundy;
- The papacy was morally corrupt, caught in the power struggles of the Italian nobility, with the result there was spiritual decline;
- Church property was devastated, nobility treated bishoprics and monasteries as their personal property, clergy were indifferent to duty;
- There was an almost total collapse of civil order and culture; there was famine, plague, destruction, poor commerce and depleted population.

In 909 a group of French monks wrote despairingly of the world of their day:

'The cities are depopulated, the monasteries ruined and burned, the country reduced to solitude ... As the first people lived without law or fear of God, abandoned to their passions, so now everyone does what seems good in their own eyes, despising laws human and divine and the commands of the church. The strong oppress the weak, the world is full of violence against the poor and plunder the goods of the church ... people devour one another like fishes in the sea'.

There was every reason for despair; western European civilisation must have appeared to face oblivion. However, from our perspective we can see there were there also a few faint signs of hope:

Pinpoints of light

- In 910 there were the beginnings of a Benedictine renewal at Cluny;
- In 911 Norsemen [Normans] settled in northern France; invasions abating;
- In 962 the German, Otto I, restored the position of emperor;
- In 966 the ruler of Poland was baptised;
- In 1000 the king of Hungary was baptised.



Coping and controlling

As we view the church at the end of the first millennium it is a sobering experience. Much of the territory associated with its early expansion has been lost. In the east there is renaissance in Byzantium and expansion into Russia but hemmed in by Islam.

In the west there is blight. Yet beneath the surface there were structures in place that within a short time would give birth to what has been described as, 'the most elaborate and thoroughly integrated system of religious thought and practice the world has ever known'.

The church no longer saw itself as a community of those who had freely chosen to be disciple of Jesus, but as a whole human society subject to the will of God; an 'ark of salvation' in a sea of destruction. A compulsory society where baptismal promises, made by others on a child's behalf at birth, were a legally binding contract upon them for the rest of their life and could never be broken.

The church was the state and only fully orthodox believers were full citizens; outsiders like Jews could survive if they could, all others forfeited the right to live. All this was the consequence of the gradual but persistent belief that the kingdom of God upon earth must be an equivalent to a Christianised Roman empire. As Hobbes put it so well:

'The papacy became the ghost of the Roman empire sitting crowned upon its own grave'

Turning the tide

The year 1000 passed. The world did not end; in fact the social order in western Europe remained much the same as it had done for the previous 400 years with little sign that very much would change. But remarkably, within 100 years life was to have changed in every respect; and this change is one of the surprising facts of the Middle Ages. A growing self-confidence in many people replaced the inferiority and insecurity of the past. There was:

- Major economic expansion;
- Population growth;
- Settlement of wastelands;
- Road improvement;
- New farming methods;
- Increasing urbanisation, but majority of population agrarian;
- Weakness in the eastern church and Islam gave the West more power.

Feudal framework

Society was a feudal system, strengthened by the tumults of the 10th century in which all that counted were the bonds that people created between them by oath. Land belonged to the warrior who defended it, who in turn was under the protection of a more powerful lord who granted their vassal possession of a fiefdom or benefice. So there was a hierarchy of warriors and landowners. The church was caught up in this system. Ecclesiastical office had land to provide the incumbent with a living; so a bishop was also both lord and vassal, controlling land, dispensing justice, maintaining an army; hence people's desire to hold ecclesiastical position, which also had spiritual as well as temporal influence. These offices were appointed, not by election as in the past, but at the behest of emperors, kings, dukes



and lords; known as 'lay investiture'. Because church positions were not hereditary they were redistributed at the death of the holder to whoever had earned favour. So western Europe was a society in which 'everyman' had their allotted 'station', usually fixed by birth and offering little chance of any movement from it. Added to this, it was believed that feudalism produced a divinely ordained balance to society in which, 'Some pray, some fight and some work'.

Spiritual superiority

As the age progressed, the 'spiritual' aura that the secular rulers had drawn around themselves was increasingly seen to be absurd. They were neither priest nor monk, so they could be only a layperson. With the expansion of agriculture and commerce, society became increasingly complex and demanded more sophisticated solutions to its problems. These could be found only in acquiring more expert knowledge. Education, above elementary level, was in the hands of the church, which gave it not only spiritual power but also real secular power. This increased the gap between the clergy and the laity.

Christendom culture

What has emerged is a phenomenon we refer to as 'Christendom'; that quite particular relationship between church and society, which formed the essence of the Middle Ages. The peoples of Europe were seen as being held together by a common commitment to the Christian faith. Church and state were viewed as the spiritual and temporal aspects of the same reality; like the spirit and body of a person. According to idealists, the community had meaning only in the ultimate fulfilment as the kingdom of God. The church was the state. Ecclesiastical organisation became monolithic; even though national forces were able to put some limits upon it. Every sphere of life, in all its complicated detail, was seen to fit into a single socio-spiritual system that was authoritative. It was believed to be a 'theocracy', with God at the apex of the feudal pyramid. All activities and achievements were understood as being directed towards the single end: the glory of God. The reality we shall explore.

WEST-EAST SCHISM

Strains and tensions

We have seen that from the 5th century onwards there had been an increasing gap developing between the Latin churches of the West and their focus on Rome and the Greek churches of the East with their focus on Constantinople. The reasons were political, cultural and theological:

- The Greek church was controlled by the political power of Byzantium, while in the West the papacy operated politically and often appeared to be against the interests of the east;
- The 10th century saw the Latin West as a cultural desert, perceived by the East as savages, while the West saw the Byzantines as culturally effete;
- The West distinguished between rite and belief, while the East saw any change of ritual as a change of faith; they saw questions about fasting, the eucharist, priest marriage, and the West's inclusion of the *filioque*¹ clause in the Nicæan creed, as very important;

¹ By the time of the Council of Toledo in 589 the church in the West (mainly under Augustine's influence), had come to accept a small but significant addition of the word *filioque* (Lat: 'and from the Son'), to the



- The Byzantines honoured the Bishop of Rome but were collegial in their view of episcopacy, whereas the pope frequently claimed universal authority in the church.

Schism and division

From the 5th to the 11th centuries these were the themes that led to a number of divisions and reconciliations between the church, east and west. In 1054 the threat of a common enemy in the Normans in southern, Byzantine Italy led to a renewed attempt at reconciliation. Sadly the mediators on each side were not adequate to the task; they did not understand each other's cultural background and they were both stubborn. Not finding any basis for discussion or agreement, the papal legate, Cardinal Humbert, solemnly excommunicated the Byzantine patriarch, Michael Cerularius, in Constantinople's church of St Sophia. Humbert returned to Rome claiming a great victory for the Latin church. At the time the events were not seen as so important, relations continued east and west; but in hindsight 1054 is symbolically significant:

- No real reconciliation followed this date;
- The crusades widen the gap further. The brutal conquest of Constantinople by Crusaders on 13th April 1204 killed reconciliation any real hopes of reconciliation
- The councils of Lyons (1274) and Florence (1438) achieve nothing substantial;
- The fall of Constantinople in 1453 highlights the isolation of the Eastern church.

Death of Orthodoxy in England

Also some thoughts on '1066' and the Norman Conquest from an Orthodox angle:

- The Norman conquest was blessed by the Papacy
- Many thousands of Old English and priests fled to Byzantium ²
- Many Old English nobles became personal bodyguards of the Byzantine Emperor (the 'Varangian Guard')
- King Harold's daughter married the future Grand Prince of Kiev. Their child was named 'Mstislav-Harold' and is a saint in the Orthodox Church

CHRISTENDOM AND PAPACY

Papacy controlled and corrupted

As the new era dawned we find the papacy at its lowest ebb. During the 10th century the womenfolk of a rich Italian family kept the papacy under their control, installing lovers and illegitimate sons as bishop of Rome, which explains why there were papal concubines and teenage popes. The emperor also was a strong influence. Corruption of the papacy was a symbol of widespread corruption throughout church leadership. Bishops were appointed by 'lay investiture'; with princes and the emperor filling ecclesiastical posts with military men or their own sons - there were few if any spiritual considerations:

original form of the Nicene Creed, which simply states that the Spirit, 'proceeds from the Father'. The addition appears originally to have been a copyist's mistake that soon became part of the popular form of the creed in the West. The eastern church stayed true to the original. While the difference may appear to be simply a matter of words and terminology the '*filioque* clause' became a formal basis for a break between the Eastern and Western churches in c.850. The Eastern church argued it was not a directly scriptural phrase, it was not in the original form of the Creed and that it could weaken the concept of the subordination of the Son. The West argued that the doctrine of 'double procession' dated from Tertullian (c.200). The New Testament speaks of the 'Spirit of Christ' (cf Rm 8:9), and Jesus baptises with the Spirit (Mt 3:11) and sends the Spirit (Jn 20:22), which is all that is implied. It also argued that the *filioque* identifies the Spirit as the unifying bond proceeding from Father and Son alike into the Church knitting the whole together.

² This is believed to be the case, but evidence to substantiate this statement is not easy to find!



- **Simony:** selling ecclesiastical power was widespread (see Acts 8:20);
- **Nicolaitism:** keeping priestly concubines was frequent (see Rev 2:6,14-15).

In 1032 Benedict IX was 'elected' at 12 years old by his political masters; the older he grew the more debauched he became, shocking even the libertine Italians.

Steps towards reform

Throughout the church, especially from centres of spiritual revival such as Cluny and its monasteries, there was a growing demand for major reform and a more holy church. We see successive popes trying to break free from the power of the emperor and political control. In 1059 Pope Nicholas II made the innovative ruling that cardinals alone should appoint the pope.³ Understandably, the emperor, in particular, did not take kindly to his power in appointment being eroded by cardinals.

▪ Hildebrand and reform

In 1073 Hildebrand was appointed Pope Gregory VII. He was from Cluny, the great centre of Benedictine revival, and became a great champion for moral, spiritual and structural reform.⁴ It was individuals like Hildebrand, who along with others, set the direction for the papacy to become the dominating force of the Middle Ages. He made the 'Donation of Constantine' clear papal policy, but went far beyond even this. He saw the pope not simply 'vicar of St Peter' but 'vicar of Christ himself', with divine given authority over kings and emperors. The following are some of his many statements:

- The pope can be judged by none;
- The Roman church, founded by Christ, has never erred nor ever will err until the end of time;
- The pope can depose or restore bishops, and alone can authorise their appointment;
- The pope alone can reverse his own statements;
- The pope can depose emperors, and all princes are to kiss his feet;
- The papal court inhibits the judgment of all inferior courts;
- The pope is undoubtedly made a saint by the merits of St Peter.

Statements like these were designed to give the pope total sovereignty in all affairs of Christendom. These statements grew to have practical force throughout Europe in a short period of time.

Hildebrand challenged 'lay investiture' at every level. He forbade bishops to accept appointment by rulers, and forbade archbishops to consecrate any such person. Matters came to a head in 1075 when Hildebrand excommunicated the emperor, Henry IV, for independently appointing a bishop. Popular fear of the pope's spiritual authority led to Henry becoming completely isolated and being forced to seek the papal absolution. In the depths of winter in 1077, the emperor, with his wife and son, were forced to stand exposed

³ Initially all bishops, including the Bishop of Rome, were appointed by popular choice of the people. Then, as we have seen, they became appointed by secular political powers; the decision to appoint the pope by using cardinals [the most important clergy] alone has characterised the choice of the pope ever since.

⁴ Without being too simplistic there is a sense in which one can say that the 'reformation' begins with Hildebrand; an attempt to reform internally, which did not succeed; leaving the 'reformation' of the 16th century as the logical consequence of its failure.

to ice and snow in the courtyard of the castle of Cannosa for three days and nights, before being given an audience with the pope to be received back into the church. All Christendom watched and saw where the real power lay. Ironically, in 1085 Hildebrand was to die in exile, a prisoner of the Normans, but nonetheless he had set a standard others would follow.

▪ **Papal power and Innocent III**

There was an ongoing struggle for papal supremacy. The tensions between spiritual and temporal power continued for some time, but increasingly the bishops of Rome asserted themselves:

- They called councils of the church in which only the western Latin church was involved, called 'Lateran Councils';
- They collected papal letters and rulings on various matters ('decretals') from the past, which were given the same authority as Scripture;⁵
- They established 'Canon law' as the omnipresent government throughout the Roman church of western Europe;
- They interfered more and more in the daily life of the church.

It is with Innocent III (1198–1216) that the papacy reaches the height of its powers. He attempts to take the direction already set to its logical conclusion:

- He becomes the supreme arbiter in Europe;
- He appoints the emperor and makes the English king bow to his will;
- He develops the theory of papal power as a 'theocracy';
- He affirmed that he held the fullness of power in Christendom. Spiritually all churches were under his control; while the temporal sphere was autonomous, the pre-eminence of the spiritual gave him the right to intervene in political affairs when salvation was at stake in a sinful world.

So between the 11th and 13th centuries we have seen the papacy develop into what has been described as 'the grandest, most developed and integrated system for conducting human life'. Papal government became central, extending to every corner of western Europe, and came to expect instant obedience. It erected a huge machinery of bureaucratic government, with enormous numbers of papal agents; an increasing flood of appeals on every aspect of life poured into the papal courts seeking either justice or favour. Of course, at every level, each cog in the wheel had to be oiled by the exchange of money. It was impossible to live 'outside' this system, and to live within it demanded that you were 'orthodox'.

Faith and society

The multitude of great cathedrals which thrust their great spires skyward across Europe, between the 11th and 13th centuries, eloquently symbolise the power and confidence of Christendom. The ordinary peasant people who lived beneath their buttresses were perceived as being Christian; but it was a social and cultural Christianity within which there was as much superstition, fear and scepticism as there was personal faith. Medieval religion was shaped by rural and feudal society. God, the supreme Lord, was loved but greatly feared; every pain or pleasure of life was the result of divine providence. Peasant

⁵ This explains why the 'forged' or 'false decretals' like the 'Donation of Constantine' could be used to reinforce papal power.

people mixed Christian and pagan ideas into the fabric of their lives. As we have seen, Christendom became an exclusive society:

- Membership demanded baptism within a few days of birth, and the oaths taken by the parents and godparents were binding on the person until their death;
- Confession and communion were emphasised, with the mass becoming a mysterious spectacle; seeing the elevation of the host became almost magical;
- The language of the liturgy and Scripture was Latin, many of the clergy had little education – all ground for ignorance and superstition;
- Churches and cathedrals were public places, even a refuge in times of war; to attend mass may have been an obligation but the occasion was often more social than spiritual;
- Popular religion expressed itself in festivals with miracle and mystery plays, and at times open clowning, such as at the Feast of Fools;
- There was a continuing interest in touching the sacred that expressed itself in everything from holding a relic to going on pilgrimage.

We need to recognise that there was often a real difference between what the church officially demanded and what happened in practice, with greed often being judged more harshly than fornication. There were also many who were concerned about the spiritual needs of the common people and worked to meet them. As we shall see, there were a small but significant number who challenged the status quo as a whole.

MONASTIC FLOWERING

Call for reform

We have noted before the important part monasticism plays in the story of the church east and west, and the way in which the Benedictine Order, which was founded in 529, grew to dominate the life of church and society throughout western Europe in the early Middle Ages. However, both the passage of time and success, plus the ravages upon society from the 9th century brought degeneracy and abuse. There were increasing calls for reform.

Cluny and revival

In 910, when a renewed and invigorated Benedictine monasticism began to flower at Cluny in central France, it was not only a protest against the degeneracy into which so much monastic life had fallen, but also against the control of the state over the church. The reforms at Cluny were both religious and organisational:

- The main principles of the Benedictine Order were restored;
- The abbot was elected independently of princes and bishops;
- The abbey affirmed its allegiance directly to the pope;
- The personalities and longevity of its early abbots gave it influence;
- The order championed the papacy and provided bishops and popes;
- The order did much to aid the reform of other monasteries and the church;
- The stress was on liturgy and continuous prayer, not manual work;
- The liturgy and church buildings created a sense of magnificence;
- The community was to be a 'picture of heaven upon earth';
- The abbey was generous in its charity to the poor;
- Church building influenced the spread of Romanesque architecture.



One of the most significant characteristics of Cluny was its complex and centralised organisation when it came to founding 'daughter' houses. These did not become independent with their own abbot as in other Benedictine foundations, but instead they each had a prior who was obedient to the abbot at Cluny. In its heyday, in the middle of the 12th century, what was referred to as the 'state of Cluny' consisted of 314 dependent monasteries with some 50,000 monks; a powerful network and influence.

Citeaux and Cistercians

The reforms at Cluny restored dignity to the monastic movement; however, their emphasis on magnificence in liturgy and buildings did not satisfy the longing that many had for a return to the most simple and austere interpretation of the Benedictine rule. In 1098 a group of hermits, led by Robert de Molesme and an Englishman – Stephen Harding – founded a monastery in the wild valley of the River Saone at Citeaux in Burgundy with just that intention. There was to be:

- A complete break with the 'backsliders' of Cluny;
- Poverty in food and clothing;
- Simplicity in church buildings and services;
- Silence and austerity;
- Emphasis upon manual work;
- An assembly ('chapter') of abbots once a year;
- The commitment 'to be like Christ'.

One of the most significant characteristics of these 'white monks' (they wore white habits in contrast to the black Benedictine habit), was their desire to imitate the early Christian monastics and search out the wilderness places away from society. They were wholly self-sufficient, establishing huge farms in previously desolate areas, dominating the landscape. In time they introduced lay brothers (*conversi*) to work the land while they prayed and studied. In time their economic activities, especially sheep farming, brought them great wealth and ironically reversed their austerity. Nevertheless, in 1300 there were over 600 Cistercian monasteries and nunneries, indicating the strength and influence of the movement.

Clairvaux and Bernard

One of the main reasons for the influence of the Cistercian order was Bernard (1090–1153). He was a Burgundian nobleman from Dijon who, with 30 companions, joined the hermits at Citeaux and then in 1115 founded an abbey at Clairvaux. He himself went on to found 66 abbeys personally. The influence of Bernard of Clairvaux was enormous; it is said that in the middle of the 12th century he was the most important person in the church. He was often far from his abbey, involving himself in different matters:

- He attacked Cluny on the grounds of laxity and decadence;
- He worked for the reform of the clergy;
- He encouraged bishops to practise poverty and concern for the poor;
- He tried to Christianise feudal society, but did not understand the growing challenges to it;
- He challenged the powerful and the extravagant living of the rich;
- He saw one of his monks selected as Pope Eugenius III;
- He made peace between the French king and his feudal subjects;



- He proclaimed the sanctity of marriage;
- He defended the faith against heresy;
- He challenging Peter Abelard and rationalism and put a brake on theological thinking;
- He preached the second crusade, but challenged the massacre of Jews;
- He wrote a rule for the militant monastic order, the Knights Templar.

Bernard was first and foremost a spiritual master, a person for whom meditation on the Scriptures was the starting point for everything else. He stressed the love and mercy of God rather than judgment. He stressed union with God rather than asceticism and spiritual exercises. His central emphasis on Jesus is seen in his hymns, 'Jesus, the very thought of Thee', 'O sacred head once wounded' and 'Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts'. His sermons on the Song of Songs remain an important example of medieval spiritual mysticism.

It was Bernard's personality rather than his intellect that made him such a dominant figure. He was rigidly orthodox and self-righteous, yet deeply pious and ascetic. He was both a contemplative mystic and a political activist. It is this mix that makes him both the influence and paradox he was.

Augustinian canons

Another reaction to the Benedictine monopoly on monasticism arose, about the same time as the Cistercians, in the form of the Augustinian canons. In some ways they were a greater challenge than the Cistercians because they broke with the traditional patterns of monasticism and identified with Augustine of Hippo, the greatest name in the western church. They were reaching behind the Benedictine Rule, behind the organised church and back to the Bible, to live like the first apostles.

The earliest origins of the movement are obscure. People looking for a simple and early form of monasticism took a letter written by Augustine to some religious women advising them how they could live as the first apostles would have done. The attractiveness of Augustine's 'Rule' was that it was hardly a Rule at all. It was very sensible and extremely general:

- Have all things in common;
- Pray together at appointed times;
- Dress without distinction;
- Obey a superior.

It could be interpreted in so many ways and used by different communities in whichever ways it suited them; some took a 'severe' line, others a 'broad'. The spontaneity, variety and freedom of the movement contrasts it with others. The Augustinian canons were never as influential as the other orders, but they were important. They were inexpensive to found; quite unlike the Benedictines. They thrived on contact with the world around and were found in the shadow of the castle or the town; they identified with their surroundings quite unlike the Cistercians who dominated theirs. Augustinian canons ran many small schools, hospitals and places of retirement for the sick, the aged, for pregnant women, for the blind and for lepers. They were modest in demands and style, and serving in attitude; this appealed to the spirit of the times. They were the most prolific of medieval monastic orders with thousands of communities in the 13th century.

Hermits and anchorites

By the end of the 11th century there was a strong movement of men and women who took themselves off to 'dreadful' places – forests, caves, ravines and islands – in search of penitence and poverty to expiate their sins. However, their saintliness often attracted crowds and they became popular preachers.

Other men and women embraced the life of a recluse within the urban environment by becoming anchorites. They had themselves incarcerated in small rooms at the side of churches, with small angled windows through which they could hear services and receive food. They remained there devoting their lives to prayer and penance until they died.

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