

'Rough Terrain'

- *Mendicants, Scholars, Soldiers and Dissidents (1000-1300 CE)*

MENDICANTS AND MISSION

Urban challenge

The years of the 13th century saw the papacy reach the height of its powers, but during these times society was also changing. There was growing urbanisation with the growth of towns; there was intellectual ferment and, as we shall see, theological dispute which challenged the church. An important response to meet the new demands was found in the rise of the Mendicant Orders. Their members became known as 'friars', working in the environment of the towns and universities. It has been said of them that 'without the towns they never would have become great'. Their humble lives and spirits, and their concern for ordinary people, gave them a great appeal. However, in Francis and Dominic we see quite contrasting responses to the challenges of their day.

Francis and the Friars Minor

Francis was born about 1181, the son of a rich cloth merchant in Assisi. His youth was filled with dreams of chivalry. In 1205, following a pilgrimage to Rome, he believed God was calling him to rebuild churches like St Damian near Assisi. He gave all his possessions, even his clothes, to his father, who disowned him. He took up the life of a hermit, begging or working to provide for his needs, and for the rebuilding programme. In 1209 he heard the words of Matthew 10:7-10 preached:

'Go and proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
Take with you neither gold or silver ...'

These words formed the call to a life of apostolic poverty. With several companions he set off along the highways and byways, joyfully proclaiming the gospel of peace. Francis preached without being a priest, but he did not sit in judgment on church or priesthood. He simply asked for the freedom to live according to the gospel as Jesus had done. As the number of his followers grew, he composed a short Rule based on the Gospels and the Franciscan Order formally began. In 1212 Pope Innocent III approved them, giving them the title 'Friars Minor', the lowest rung on the social ladder.

Francis and his followers gave their lives to spiritual preaching and caring for the sick and the poor:

- In ten years the movement numbered 3,000 followers;
- In 1212 the women's order was founded by Clare ('Poor Clares');
- In 1219 Francis went to Palestine on mission;
- In 1223 a new, more detailed Rule, was written to cope with growth.

Towards the end of Francis' life, the order faced tensions that were to last four centuries; tensions between those who wanted to hold to original simplicity and those who insisted on greater organisation and development due to growth. In 1223 Francis stepped down from leadership and spent the final three years of his life in prayer and solitude during



which time he composed his 'Canticle to the Sun' and his 'Testament'. He died 3 October 1226.

Francis' desire to express the simplicity of discipleship of Jesus has been his lasting legacy, and his affinity with nature is a compelling example. He expressed the desire to 'be like Christ' in a wholly different way from that of the Cistercians. Franciscans have left their historical mark in providing five popes, and in teaching and mission.

Dominic and the Friars Preachers

Dominic Guzman was born in 1170, in Old Castile in Spain. He became an influential Augustinian canon. In 1203 he travelled to Languedoc, in southern France, where the church was struggling to combat heresy.¹ The splendour of the Cistercians, the envoys of Innocent III engaged in the dispute, contrasted with the simplicity of the dissidents they were challenging. Dominic declared that there was need for simple preachers of the truth 'imitating the poverty of Christ' if they were to win the 'heretics' back. By 1215 he had gathered a small company of preachers, under the Augustinian rule, recognised by the Bishop of Toulouse:

'We recognise brother Dominic and his companions as preachers in our diocese, with the aim of stamping out corruption and heresies, of pursuing vice, and teaching the rule of faith and instilling saintly habits in the people. Their way of life is to live like religious, travel around on foot, in the poverty enjoined by the gospel, while preaching the word of truth.'

In 1216 the pope himself recognised the Order of Friars Preachers. Dominic's life was spent travelling tirelessly in Italy, France and Spain. While planning to preach in Hungary he fell ill and died in Bologna in 1221.

Dominic was a determined but humble leader, devout in faith and had a passion for preaching the truth. These hallmarks characterised the movement. Dominicans always saw themselves as evangelists and defenders of the faith. Their flexibility and mobility made them useful to the papacy as agents for many and various tasks. They were great missionaries; they were also great scholars, with Thomas Aquinas being a famous example. Sadly, in time the Dominicans came to staff the work of the Inquisition. There are interesting parallels between Dominic and Francis, yet the character of their respective movements is quite distinct.

REASON AND FAITH

Cathedral schools

The revival of learning that took place in the court of Charlemagne under the influence of Alcuin, continued into the 10th and 11th centuries in the form of cathedral schools (which Charlemagne encouraged), and also in the monasteries. Initially it was the monasteries that were the most influential places of learning, where good teachers taught, not only novices, but also the children of wealthy families. However, by the 12th century, the cathedral schools had become the most important centres of learning. Students would

¹ The Cathari to whom we shall refer below



study under a chancellor who, under the authority of the bishop, would give them a licence to teach at the completion of their studies.

Birth of the universities

We see then that education in western Europe during the Middle Ages was entirely in the hands of the church. The bishop controlled who taught and what was taught. However, in important centres such as Paris, cathedral schools drew large numbers of students and the desire for learning and the stimulus of intellectual debate saw teachers and students restless to be free from the control of the bishop. They wanted autonomy like the trade guilds had to organise their own affairs. After a struggle the universities came into being.² The first universities appeared in Bologna, Paris, Salerno, Oxford, Cambridge and elsewhere.

Scholasticism

The study and intellectual pursuit that took place between the 9th and 14th centuries is called the age of 'Scholasticism' and its great teachers are called the 'schoolmen'. These were days of great intellectual debate and disagreement, but what marks them out as distinct was the particular *way* and *style* of thinking. There was the constant attempt to blend theology and human reason into a single system of thought. The whole approach was 'philosophical'; examining the logical links and implications of ideas.

A huge stimulus to scholasticism was the rediscovery, in the 12th century, of the writings of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. They came via Muslim sources and often from Arabic translation. Here was a way of thinking quite uninfluenced by the Bible. The debates stimulated by these and other ideas were considered very dangerous by many in the church, and brought resistance from a number of quarters.

Scholasticism produced many great thinkers. We can mention only three as an example of the breadth of thinking throughout this period:

- **Anselm** (1033–1109) An Italian, Anselm, became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093 following the Norman conquest. A great reformer, he was one of the early scholastic theologians. He taught that faith must lead to the right use of reason, 'I believe, in order that I might understand.' As a philosopher he originated the 'ontological argument' for the existence of God; we have a conception of God as 'that which no greater can be conceived'; to exist in thought, not reality, would make him inferior to the greatest being that did exist, this cannot be so he must exist! As a theologian he made an important contribution to understanding the atonement in his book, *Why Did God Become Man?*
- **Abelard** (1079–1142) Born in Brittany, Peter Abelard's life was one of personal turmoil and conflict with authority. He was a brilliant teacher who was followed wherever he went by large numbers of students. His working maxim was, 'by doubting we are led to question, by questioning we arrive at truth'. In his book, *Yes and No*, he showed that tradition and authority were incapable of answering questions such as 'Is God omnipotent?' His desire for 'authority' in faith and practice anticipated the debates of the

² The word *universitas* was a guild term; in northern Europe they tended to be guilds of teachers, in Italy they were often guilds of students.



16th- century Reformation. His desire to reconcile 'faith with reason' paved the way for Aquinas in the next century.

- **Aquinas** (1225–1274) Born in Aquino, Italy, Thomas Aquinas was the greatest scholastic theologian of the medieval era. Once a fat, slow, pious schoolboy nicknamed the 'Dumb Ox', he was destined to develop one of the most internally consistent systems of thought ever devised, which is still the basis of orthodox Catholic theology. A prolific writer, his works fill eighteen large volumes. He was enthralled by the ideas of Aristotle, and he endeavoured to make a synthesis between them and Christian tradition. His work has been described as a lake into which many streams flowed and from which many have drawn, but was not itself a water source. His skill lay in drawing together what had gone before and the rigorous way he questioned.

The schoolmen were intellectual giants. They often attempted the impossible, trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. Greek philosophy and biblical revelation often cannot be harmonised. Many of the questions they pursued are irrelevant in a scientific world and with a true understanding of Scripture.

CRUSADES AND MISSION

The peoples of western Europe lived in an enclosed world, viewing the nations outside of the realms of Christendom as infidels. The Muslim peoples in the East were seen as a threat, especially the newly arrived Turks from the steppes of central Asia. The response to the challenge Islam was to provoke events that leave a tragic and violent scar on the story of the church. It also opened the eyes of a few to the demands of mission.

Call to crusade

Muslims were perceived not only as a political threat, but also they occupied the most sacred sites of Christian pilgrimage in Palestine. These and other factors led to the era of the 'crusades' between the years 1095 to 1270 – events that were a powerful shaping force upon the Middle Ages.

A 'crusade' was first preached by Hildebrand (Gregory VII), but was actually carried out by his successors. It was the cry of Pope Urban II in 1095 that started the momentum across Europe:

'... an accursed race utterly alienated from God ... has invaded these lands of the Christians and depopulated them by the sword, plundering and fire ... start upon the road to the Holy Sepulchre to tear that land from the wicked race and subject it to yourselves.'

The cry in response was *Deus Vult* ('God wills it'); this became the watchword for the whole crusading movement. That same year Peter 'the hermit' – an uncouth, unkempt preacher – stirred thousands into a frenzy of enthusiasm, leading them to be decimated along the road towards Jerusalem. It was later in 1096 that the first official, and most successful, crusade set out, via Constantinople, with some 50,000 soldiers. Only a tenth of the original number actually arrived in 1099 at Jerusalem, which they captured after a horrific massacre of the Muslim and Jewish population. From this beginning, the fortunes of the crusades became increasingly mixed and unsuccessful. Crusader kingdoms were set up in Palestine, but Saladin recaptured Jerusalem in 1187 and with the fall of Acre there were no crusaders left by 1291.



We can make the following broad observations about the crusading movement during the Middle Ages:

- They increased the power and status of the pope who fuelled them with every means at his disposal;
- They proved an outlet for the warring passions of European rulers and had little genuine spiritual motive;
- They left in their wake not only the massacre of Muslims but also an unspeakable massacre of Jews throughout Europe;
- The joining of the two themes of 'holy war' and 'pilgrimage';
- They increased the tension between the churches east and west;
- They are popularly imagined as eight clear campaigns, but it is more accurate to see them as a continuous movement with strong popular support, sometimes made up of large organised expeditions and at other times smaller ones;
- They brought important contact between East and West, especially in bringing Greek science and literature to Europe, which was to fuel both scholasticism and the Renaissance.

Call for mission

The failure of the crusades caused some people to think carefully about their relationship with the Muslim world, and other peoples beyond the boundaries of western Europe:

- During the 12th century the evangelisation of north eastern Europe was completed with missions to the Scandinavian and Prussian peoples;
- During the fifth crusade in 1218, Francis of Assisi crossed the Saracen lines chanting Psalm 23, and was taken to preach to the Sultan of Egypt;
- A Spanish Franciscan Raymond Lull (1235–1316) called for the conversion of Muslims by works of love and debate, and by understanding their language and doctrines. He called for the church to found schools to prepare for this work. He himself visited North Africa four times to preach and debate with Muslims, eventually dying from injuries received;
- Groups of 'Pilgrim Friars' (Franciscans and Dominicans) travelled to central Asia, Persia, India and China.

DISSENT AND INQUISITION

Dissent and the Waldensians

▪ 'Orthodox' and 'heretic'

The perceived threat to Christendom was not only the external forces of Islam, but also those within who were believed to challenge the 'orthodox' faith and therefore the status quo. Such people were called 'heretics', a word which literally means 'the exercise of choice'. As we shall increasingly see, there were those in western Europe who believed that it was essential to purify and reform the church, while there were others who believed the only future was in an alternative form of church altogether.



▪ **'Poor men of Lyons'**

One of the most important of these dissenting movements were the Waldensians or the 'poor men of Lyon's. They are said to have gained their name from Peter Waldo (or Valdes), a merchant from Lyons who experienced conversion about 1175. There is reason to believe that the movement itself actually predated him. He gave away his wealth and possessions, deciding to live a simple life of preaching and poverty, following the example of Jesus. Waldo translated the Latin New Testament into the language of the area; he preached to his fellow citizens and many men and women joined him. These dedicated people prayed, read the Scriptures and preached in the market places, 'You cannot serve two masters, God and mammon!' Initially their evangelism won the pope's approval, provided the local church authorities agreed, because they were orthodox in their original aims. The crisis came, however, when they attacked the wealthy and laxity of the established church, and resulted in their being banned by the Archbishop of Lyons.

▪ **Scattered but strong**

Soon serious attempts were being made to silence them; but this only encouraged them to preach more zealously. The Waldensians were soon found spread through Languedoc, Provence and northern Italy, and then scattered to every corner of Europe, except Britain. By 1184 they received official excommunication and branded as heretics:

- They set up their own 'true church' with bishops, priests and deacons and determined that lifestyle determined a true minister;
- They were against work simply to acquire wealth and they rejected both the swearing of oaths and the death penalty;
- They expanded both doctrinally and geographically and made common cause with other dissenting groups;
- They held a general council in Italy to iron out difficulties between groups;
- Their work and influence was to survive in inaccessible Alpine valleys and be part of the ferment of biblical ideas that would come to flower in the Reformation of the 16th century.

▪ **Peter and Francis**

The parallels between Peter Waldo and Francis of Assisi are fascinating. They were both from merchant families, gave away their wealth to follow Jesus in poverty, became preachers of God's love and drew a strong following. The significant and critical difference was Peter Waldo's insistence on challenging corruption in the church, which Francis never did. Francis was able to remain included and influence the church from within, while the Waldensians were excluded; nevertheless both were significant witnesses.

These were days of many other small dissident movements who wanted to return to the gospel and the early church, and often drew inspiration from the prophetic books and Revelation. Many became apocalyptic and millennial groups who believed in an imminent in-breaking of God to redress the injustices perpetuated by the established church. So beneath the surface of the medieval world flowed powerful spiritual currents that were to have significant influence in the years ahead.



Cathari and the Inquisition

▪ 'Pure Ones'

We have already seen how, in the early Middle Ages, dissenting groups in Armenia and the Balkans were influenced by dualistic and Gnostic ideas; the Paulicians and the Bogomils. Early in the 12th century, Bogomil missionaries travelled from Bulgaria following the Danube westwards. We know Bogomils were burnt in Cologne in 1142. Soon teaching clearly influenced by the Bogomils took deep root in southern France (particularly in the Languedoc) and northern Italy. The members of this movement called themselves 'Cathari'.³

The name 'Cathar' means 'pure one'. They clearly thought of themselves as Christians and referred to themselves as the 'good Christians'. However, it is clear that they held dualistic Gnostic-type doctrines expressed in Christian terms:

- They were struggling with the important question, 'Why is there evil in the world?'
- They believed two gods; the good creating the spiritual world, the evil created the physical world imprisoning the spiritual soul in a body;
- They did not believe in the incarnation; Christ was spirit and only an appearance;
- They believed in reincarnation, which Christ came to reveal salvation from;
- They forbade marriage, were vegetarian and abhorred violence;
- They taught a supreme sacrament, the *consolamentum*, spiritual baptism which gave the Holy Spirit and removed original sin and assured unity with the good god at death;
- They taught that there were two classes of Cathar; the 'perfect' who had already received *consolamentum* and 'believers' who had not.

One reason why Catharism flourished in the Languedoc was because at this time there was continual conflict between the ruling families and the church showed no pastoral care and usually provided only ignorant immoral clergy. The Cathari had simple styled but eloquent preachers such as Guilhabert de Castres who appealed to the peasant communities. The Roman church was incensed not only by their doctrines but also by the fact that the Cathari taught that the Roman church was major agent of the forces of evil.

▪ Debate and destroy

In 1207 Dominic Guzman, founder of the Dominicans, came to debate with Guilhabert and others, but with no substantial success. So in 1209 Pope Innocent III proclaimed the Albigensian⁴ crusade against them because it seemed their influence would lead to their control of the entire south of France. The campaign, which involved 10,000 troops from all over Europe, was ruthless and decimated the whole area. The Cathari died fearlessly and faithfully, being burned in their hundreds as town after town, such as Beziers, Minerve and Montsegur, were ravaged. By 1217 the Cathari power bases were broken; now followed

³ There is a very helpful introduction to the Cathari in Tobias Churton, '*The Gnostics*' Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987) Part 2, 'The Good Men', pp. 67-96.

⁴ The term 'Albigensian' is almost certainly another way of referring to the Cathari and comes from the fact that many of them were centred on the town of Albi; however, some believe it also included Waldensians as well.



the painstaking task of rooting out the heretics individually. This was the task of the Inquisition, the powers of which were given to the Dominicans in 1233.

▪ Inquisition

The Inquisition is the institution whereby the civil and religious powers systematically joined forces to search out and punish heretics and papal rulings made such action general throughout the church. The path towards inquisition was slow but, with the growing number of dissenting movements threatening the concept of Christendom, something more than excommunication was seen to be needed. Some heretics were burnt in 1022, Bernard of Clairvaux argued the necessity of force against heretics in 1144, and by 1199 Innocent III is calling heresy 'high treason'. There were three stages to inquisition: persuasion, canonical sanctions pronounced by the church, and finally appeal to the secular force. The church pronounced the punishments and the civil authorities carried them out; which could be anything from confiscation of goods to death by burning. Of course, torture could be used to help heretics see the error of their ways and bring them to repentance. From now on, as we shall see, the tools of inquisition became part of the apparatus of the church in dealing with dissenters.

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