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Excerpt

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I

INTRODUCTION

In 1302, in the midst of his second major conflict with the French King Philip IV, Pope Boniface VIII issued one of the most ringing statements of papal headship over the church. The first substantive statement of the bull *Unam sanctam* was a forthright declaration of the nature and comprehensiveness of the Christian church:

That there is one holy, catholic, and apostolic church we are bound to believe and hold, our faith urging us, and this we do firmly believe and simply confess; and that outside this church there is no salvation or remission of sins.¹

The unity and unicity of the church were constant concerns throughout the middle ages; but in fact the church was almost equally constantly divided from the mid eleventh century, principally between the Orthodox and Catholic traditions. For western Europeans, and for Boniface VIII, however, there still remained only one real church: that headed by St Peter's successor, at Rome or wherever he happened to be in exile, as was often the case. The church – *the* church – was for them essentially a western institution, Latinate, dependent on Rome. The Christianity to be considered in the following chapters is similarly Latinate, Rome-centred in the sense that it was linked to an administrative and jurisdictional structure which acknowledged its links with the papacy, in a hierarchy of authority stretching from the pope down to the parish priest.

¹ B. Tierney, *The crisis of church and state, 1050–1300* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1964), p. 188.

LATIN CHRISTENDOM

Defining the geographical area to be covered in the following chapters presents some problems. The papal church never accepted its restriction to western Europe; and to some extent was not actually so restricted. Just as Christ was *dominus mundi*, Lord of the world, so was his Vicar: to quote *Unam sanctam* again,

If the Greeks or any others say that they were not committed to Peter and his successors, they necessarily admit that they are not of Christ's flock . . . [I]t is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.²

Those who were not for the pope were necessarily against Christ, and therefore excluded from the church outside which there was no salvation. The following chapters concentrate on developments primarily within western Europe, in territories ruled by catholics; but catholicism as such expanded far beyond the frontiers of those lands.

The more precise definition of the church which existed within western Europe obviously demands some consideration. The period under survey contains centuries during which there was effectively only one western church which, with few exceptions, continually accepted papal authority even if there were times, notably during the Great Schism of 1378–1417, when exactly who ought to be exercising that authority was unclear. The terminal dates are to some extent self-explanatory. In 1215 Pope Innocent III presided over the assembly which can be considered the culmination of his pontificate, the Fourth Lateran Council. The largest of the medieval church councils, it adopted a wide-ranging programme which has been characterised as effecting a pastoral revolution, intended to move the church into the forefront of personal experience and individual existence. At the other end of the period, after three centuries during which the church confronted institutional challenges, internal tensions, and the problems of relating to a world which refused to conform sufficiently precisely to the Christian precepts which the church decreed, there occurred the Fifth Lateran Council. In session from 1512 to 1517, that gathering to some extent marks the height of lost opportunities, for the church and the world both then needed reform of comparable breadth to that provided by Lateran IV; but the required leadership was not forthcoming. Lateran IV started a process of change, initiated a dynamism which was to be spread – with admittedly varying degrees of effectiveness – throughout the western world, and

² Tierney, *Crisis of church and state*, pp. 188–9.

beyond. Lateran V suggests that that dynamism was played out. It is not that the church lacked dynamic individuals and schemes for reform which need not have destroyed the old structure – manifestly there were such individuals, and such schemes – but the ability, possibly the will, to implement them was apparently lacking. Lateran IV reflects papal leadership and inspiration, a determination to overcome obstacles. Lateran V reflects the stultifying effects of institutionalisation, of lack of enterprise at the top which feared to move for concern about the consequences. In the end, failure to move proved the more costly option: extensive reform could not be held back indefinitely, and in this case the failure to offer a lead from the top provided the opportunity for a more damaging Reformation.

That Reformation terminated the era of the unitary western church, and began the era of denominations. Between 1215 and 1515, western unity was never seriously undermined. Although heretical groups did develop, few had sufficient strength and organisation to pose an effective challenge. The Cathars were a significant threat in the twelfth century, and had some success in creating a rival church, or churches, in southern France and parts of Italy. But papal authority had responded vigorously in the thirteenth century, and the Inquisition and the Albigensian Crusade put paid to that rivalry. Later, the only serious structural threat was offered by the Hussites in fifteenth-century Bohemia. Their creation of a nationally organised ecclesiastical structure outside the catholic system, with its own doctrines and practices, was again a significant rival. After decades of warfare, which witnessed the eradication of the more threatening doctrinal stances, the Hussite challenge was neutralised by the *Compactata* of Basle of 1436, which reintegrated the moderate Hussites into the catholic whole in a compromise which gave the traditionalists the upper hand without totally annihilating the Hussite system. Nevertheless, the unwillingness of most Hussites to move totally outside the doctrinal system of the universal church meant that their challenge to catholicism as a system was rather limited.

Shorn of these two episodes, the geographical scope of the western church – and with it, of this book – ranged over most of western Europe throughout the period. Yet it was not a static structure. For Europe itself, there were frontiers to be pushed backwards. In the west, the Spanish Reconquest continued throughout the thirteenth century, and into the fourteenth, pushing the Christian–Islamic frontier in Iberia ever southwards. A lull after the 1340s was ended in 1492 when a brief campaign completed the expulsion of Moorish political authority from the peninsula by the capture of Granada. The Spanish Christian kingdoms had meanwhile retained substantial Islamic and Jewish populations

throughout, so that the coherence of 'Christian' Spain was to some extent compromised. Elsewhere in the western Mediterranean, the conquests of the Balearic Islands in the thirteenth century also extended Christian territory, and Alfonso X of Castile even schemed to extend Spanish rule into Africa. (Friars were actually nominated to bishoprics in Morocco, but their life expectancy was rather short if they sought to make reality of their titles.) In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, more secure north African footholds were established, with the Portuguese on the Atlantic coast and in Ceuta, and the Spaniards acquiring the coastal towns which they still hold.

In the east, changes were more extensive. In 1215, catholic Christians still had a foothold in the Levantine Crusader states – the principality of Antioch, kingdom of Jerusalem, and county of Tripoli. These Palestinian states maintained a pathetic existence throughout the thirteenth century, surviving more by chance than judgement, being slowly whittled down until the conquest of Acre in 1291 drove the Latins from their final footholds, eliminating their political and colonising presence and, despite continued dreams of crusading revival, rendering them thereafter merely tourists or tolerated residents of Jerusalem and the Holy Places. The final Christian state in the Near East – the kingdom of Cilician Armenia – was of Orthodox inclinations, although the proclamations of unity between its autonomous local church and the papacy brought it essentially within the catholic fold, even if doubts were sometimes expressed, especially in the early fourteenth century, about the completeness of its doctrinal integration. That kingdom, too, was overwhelmed in the Islamic advance, falling to the Turks in the 1370s. The other main area of concern was south-east Europe and the Balkans, particularly centring on Constantinople. In 1215 the brilliance of Lateran IV was partly due to the fact that this second Rome was held by Latin Christians: with the capture of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204, the establishment of the Empire of Romania and its satellite states gave the Latins control of the city and its dependent territory – although without actually converting the majority of the subject populations. Areas of Greece and the Balkans remained within the Latin Christian ambit for some time thereafter: Constantinople itself until its recovery by the Byzantines in 1261, and minor principalities in Achaia and the Greek Islands, which were gradually eroded away in a rather piecemeal fashion by Greek recovery on the one hand and the Turkish advance on the other – the latter in the long term taking over everything. Even by 1515, however, this process of erosion was incomplete: a number of island principalities, such as the Duchy of Naxos, remained under Latin rule; the slowly retreating commercial empires of Genoa and Venice retained most of the

Aegean islands (and Venice had recently taken over Cyprus on the extinction of the Lusignan dynasty); while the Order of St John maintained a more than symbolic presence on Rhodes.

Despite such tenacity, in the eastern Mediterranean Latin Christendom was realistically in retreat – politically at least – for most of the period, with even Italy facing threats (the Turks occupied Otranto in 1480–1). There was also political retreat in central Europe by the early sixteenth century, most dramatically evident in the Turkish conquest of Hungary following the battle of Mohacs in 1526. Just as the Latins had not converted the Greeks when they took Constantinople, however, the Turkish advance could not extirpate Christianity, whether Greek or Roman, in the territories it conquered. Moreover, even while the central and southern Slavic lands were under attack, the papacy secured a major success with the implantation of catholic Christianity on Europe's north-eastern frontier. This chiefly occurred in the later centuries, although the slow eastward advance of the German frontier and the establishment of the Teutonic Knights along the Baltic coast was a continuous process throughout. The major success was the formal adoption of Latin rather than Greek or Russian Christianity by the Grand Prince of Lithuania and his subjects in 1386, thereby bringing vast areas of eastern Europe under the oversight of the Christian missions. As the Polish–Lithuanian state expanded, a catholic ecclesiastical structure was established as far east as Kiev. Missionary activity also occurred under the Teutonic Knights in their territories, in what are now the Baltic states, although they were accused of not being as missionary as they ought to be.

Despite such expansion, the overall identification of Roman Christianity as a western European religion during this period is tenable; but it was not exclusively western European. The world-wide claims of the papacy, and of Christianity, found expression in many ways. Missionary activity continued in the Middle East – St Francis of Assisi had actually sought to convert the Sultan of Cairo – while yet further east there were high hopes of conversion of the Mongols in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The last years of the thirteenth century actually saw the nominal establishment of a series of catholic bishoprics along the route to China, terminating at Peking which was elevated to the status of an archbishopric in 1294. However, this ambitious missionary campaign seems to have fizzled out in the fourteenth century. Much closer than China there were continued efforts to expand catholicism among the Tartar realms and in the area around the Black and Caspian Seas, which continued well into the fifteenth century and met with some degree of temporary success. However, these successes were eroded by

Islamic expansion and continued vitality among local non-catholic Christian traditions. Although successions of resident bishops were maintained in some places into the fifteenth century, the reality of this failed missionary activity is epitomised by the extensive use of episcopal titles for sees now 'in the regions of the infidels' (*in partibus infidelium*) to identify suffragan bishops in western Europe. Eastern titles conferred episcopal status on those workhorses among the suffragans who ensured the continuity of diocesan sacramental activity in dioceses whose nominal bishops were otherwise engaged in secular and ecclesiastical government.

Yet the aspirations crystallised in the creation of an archbishopric of Peking, while ultimately doomed, were not quenched. The last years of the period under review saw the start of a new era of expansion, in new directions, whose repercussions were to be incalculable. To the south began the tentative Roman penetration of sub-Saharan Africa, with the conversion of the king of Kongo (now in northern Angola), who under Portuguese influence ruled as Afonso I from 1506. Much more significant in the long run was the westward expansion. Columbus may have been searching for the terrestrial paradise; he found the New World. The Christianisation of the Americas was to pose its own problems, and present major challenges, which fortunately do not have to be considered here.

DEFINING 'THE CHURCH'

The church was more than a geographical construction, and to have begun with the geographical discussion may have given a misleading impression of it. Its principal justification, and motivation, lay in the religion which it propagated. That religion entailed the creation of a complex jurisdictional and administrative system, comprising a series of courts, a system of taxation (of various kinds, and at all levels of the church), and an extensive bureaucracy. The jurisdictional and administrative pyramid headed by the papacy – wherever the papacy was, for although usually associated with Rome the centre of government was with the popes and the *curia Romana* wherever located – reached right down to the smallest of localities, through archbishoprics and provinces to the individual dioceses and their components of archdeaconries, deaneries, parishes, and chapelries. Alongside that basic system, which had its own regional variations, there was also the structure of the religious orders, many (but not all) exempt from the hierarchical jurisdictional structure of the 'secular' church and directly dependent on the papacy. Monks, canons, and friars could thus create autonomous structures, often overlapping, and not infrequently in conflict with, that of the secular

church, but integrated into the complex totality by their subjection to the universalist papacy.

Although it generated this jurisdictional and administrative organisation, that was not the defining force of the church – at least, not completely. The middle ages maintained two definitions of the church; as there still are. On the one hand, there was the restricted, institutional definition, which segregated the ‘ecclesiastical’ from the ‘secular’, insofar as that was possible. On the other hand, there was a wider definition, which encompassed the whole company of baptised Christians who acknowledged the papacy as their earthly head, and which might be extended to incorporate other Christians who had fallen into heresy or error (although the degree to which this occurred varied very much depending on circumstances). It is the wider definition which is the more significant for present purposes: that body of the faithful which made up the mystical body of the church which was also the body of Christ. The main focus of concern in the following chapters will not be with the institutional relationships, but with the reactions of the widely defined Church to the demands and dictates of Christianity. The institutional side cannot be ignored: it was, after all, the institution which actually decided on the nature of the demands and dictates of Christianity, for the most part; the attempts to enforce the disciplinary aspects of the resulting relationship will obviously demand comment. Where there was formal rejection of that disciplinary and doctrinal oversight – through defection to heresy, most blatantly – then the heretics fall outside the scope of discussion. The attention is deliberately focused primarily on the orthodox: heterodoxy may reflect differing responses to similar imperatives, but still produces a different relationship between institution and individuals, which cannot be examined here in detail.³ Problems of heresy cannot be totally excluded from consideration, however, and the unorthodox obviously played a part in the development of numerous religious practices; but they are not intended to be a prominent feature of the following chapters.⁴

Equally importantly, the disciplinary relationships under review are those which explicitly affected spiritual life. The ecclesiastical institutional and jurisdictional structure brought within its purview a whole range of contacts between ‘ecclesiastical’ and ‘secular’ life, which involved conflict over economic activities like tithes, fees, and other demands; sought to influence extensive areas of domestic life through jurisdictional claims

³ The most recent general survey is M. Lambert, *Medieval heresy: popular movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation* (Oxford, 1992).

⁴ See also below, pp. 272–5, and index.

over matrimony, implementation of wills, and suchlike; and integrated clerics into the wider structure of benefice holding which brought in issues of lay patronage and support. While all of these spheres are important for a proper understanding of the complex relationship between the church and lay society in the middle ages, the church as spiritual director of the laity provides more than enough material for present purposes. The concern here is more to consider the church's attempts to satisfy and direct the religious and devotional desires of the laity, to meet their scruples, and to answer their questions. To some extent, also, it is a matter of examining the clergy's ability to maintain control of the church as a spiritual force.

This demands more comment, for a major strand in recent consideration of medieval Christianity – perhaps of all Christianity – has highlighted the linguistic conveniences which historians adopt in dealing with 'the church' and 'religion'. Given the existence of the institution hierarchically organised up to the papacy, and the concomitant administrative structure, it is extremely easy to fall into the trap of seeing medieval Latin Christianity as a monolith, spiritually regimented and strongly controlled, with all of western Christendom subscribing to an identical set of beliefs and engaging in identical religious activities. But that perception is largely invalid. In an important contribution, Gavin Langmuir has recently proposed a distinction between 'religion', the system of beliefs prescribed by the ecclesiastical authorities, and 'religiosity', the format in which individuals construct a spiritually satisfying enactment of that religion.⁵ This pinpoints one of the key tensions which will become apparent as this survey progresses: that while there was something which can be labelled 'western Christianity', the more closely it is examined the less solid it becomes. Because Christendom contained millions of individual Christians, whose responses to the defined religion would vary with space and time, then Christianity as such becomes increasingly atomised, right down to the level of the individual engaging in practices which were found individually satisfying. That need not entail an individualistic approach to spirituality – especially if, as will be argued, a major imperative in medieval Christianity was a doctrine of charity, which generated manifestations of spirituality which were social and socially oriented. But it does mean that 'western Christianity' must be seen very much as an umbrella term, a generalisation encompassing an almost infinite variety of regional, parochial, familial, and individual Christianities which were subject to constant change and development in

⁵ G. I. Langmuir, *History, religion, and antisemitism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1990), especially chapters 7, 9, 10.

response to a wide range of forces. Yet this collection of interlocking and overlapping segments, did somehow make up a whole. Christendom might then be portrayed as a series of 'discourse communities' (in the terminology of rhetorical theorists), sharing perceptions, aspirations, and vocabulary, and operating independently at a variety of levels; but all cohering in the umbrella discourse community of 'orthodoxy'.⁶

Such a situation would obviously generate reciprocal relationships between 'institution' and 'individuals', just as there is implicit tension between 'religion' and 'religiosity'. Moreover, how far the authorities could prescribe – or, by extension, proscribe – in their defining of religion, was affected and limited precisely by that tension.

In the early thirteenth century, there is much to be said for the argument that the authorities had to initiate a programme of instruction to provide the basics of Christianity. Yet that same period, which witnessed the spread of the mendicants and the burgeoning of lay pietistic movements such as the Beguines and the mendicant Tertiary associations, also revealed one of the major problems which constantly confronted the church: it rarely had the power effectively to limit the ways in which popular spirituality actually developed. Its role was normally responsive, reacting to developments among the populace. Sometimes control and redirection were possible; but often the church's spirituality was generated at a 'grass roots' level, in cults, in devotions, in demand for indulgences and privileges. The institution could rarely initiate a totally new direction in spirituality; it might try to redirect movements after their inception, encourage them if it saw fit, or even crush them entirely; but often it had no option but tolerance, and protest against over-enthusiasm and misdirection. Ultimately, the devotional practices of the medieval church were demand-led, by the spirituality and desires of the laity. That, of course, provoked a good deal of uncertainty within the institution, and weakened its ability to present a unified, monolithic orthodoxy. Investigation of the resulting intricate relationships, of the complexities above all of what people did and felt, needs no justification.

⁶ See B. A. Rafoth, 'The concept of discourse community: descriptive and explanatory adequacy', in *A sense of audience in written communication*, ed. G. Kirsch and D. H. Roen, *Written communication annual*, 5 (Newbury Park, London, and New Delhi, 1990), pp. 140–53; B. A. Rafoth, 'A discourse community: where readers, writers, and texts come together', in *The social construction of written communication*, ed. B. A. Rafoth and D. L. Rubin (Norwood, NJ, 1988), pp. 131–46.

2

THE FAITH AND
ITS DEMANDS

Although it is no longer the habit to refer to the pre-Reformation centuries as the ‘Age of Faith’, nevertheless religion and devotion presupposed a foundation of faith, defined and made accessible. That definition has to be the first area of analysis; its format and formulation must be understood if the practices which it generated are to make any sense and be properly appreciated.

BACKGROUND TO A DEFINITION: THE RELIGIOUS FERMENT OF
THE TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH CENTURIES

When it met in Rome in the summer of 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council marked the apogee of the papacy of Innocent III, himself one of the most dynamic and influential of medieval pontiffs. The fourth general council summoned in the west by the popes, and continuing the tradition of the Lateran assemblies of 1123, 1137, and 1179, it was the most impressive and important thus far. Following the Latin Conquest of Constantinople of 1204 it could be claimed that it – unlike previous western councils – was truly representative of the universal church, with over 1,200 ecclesiastics in attendance.

The Council assembled at a critical point in the development of the Latin church. Since the period of ‘Gregorian Reform’ of the late eleventh century, western religious life had been in a state of almost unrelieved turmoil. New religious movements – notably the proliferation of regular orders like the Cistercians, Carthusians, and Augustinians – had shattered the former Benedictine monopoly of institutionalised religious life. Even