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978-0-521-81106-4 - The Cambridge History of Christianity: Volume 4: Christianity in Western Europe C. 1100–c. 1500

Edited by Miri Rubin and Walter Simons

Excerpt

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## Introduction

MIRI RUBIN AND WALTER SIMONS

Medieval Christian Europe has long been acknowledged as a place and a time central to the formation of the Christian heritage. Until recently it was still described in popular and learned books alike as the ‘age of faith’, a time of intense religious feeling and extravagant action in the pursuit of religious goals: crusade, inquisition, scholastic theology and mysticism. It was an age characterised by an imposing public Christian art and the institutions of the papacy in the lead. Until recent decades the study of medieval European Christianity was based primarily on Latin texts: theological tracts, canon law and its commentaries, and some devotional tracts. The protagonists of medieval European Christianity were popes, bishops, reforming abbots and activist preachers; its spaces were envisaged as monasteries, cathedrals and universities. While Europe’s tens of thousands of parishes were still in evidence, the quality of religion in them excited relatively little interest: provision for them being either sparse, or merely a diluted version of the official and learned formulations of scholars, popes and bishops.

This volume of *The Cambridge History of Christianity* offers the reader a series of articles that summarises some of the exciting, imaginative and transformative historical work on the religious cultures inhabited by Western Europeans between 1100 and 1500. It cannot encompass all areas of current research but it offers introductory essays to a vast range of subjects, with the expectation that the interested reader will go on to pursue more. We have aimed to give an overview of ideas and theories relating to the Christian life of institutions and individuals, as well as to provide glimpses of the implementation of such ideas within the rhythms of life in parishes and religious institutions, on city streets and along Europe’s pilgrimage routes. Every idea and practice discussed here has a complex history: from a genesis out of traditions patristic, classical or rooted in earlier medieval centuries, as well as a life within the diverse regions of Europe.

Medieval Christian life was always characterised by uniformity and diversity. Take the central cult of the Virgin Mary, with its spectacular rise in this

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period. While Mary was taught at the mother's knee, the forms of address, the shape of her statues, even the variety of feasts celebrated in her honour varied from region to region, as between, say, the emergent group of mother and son in tender embrace in thirteenth-century northern France and the seated, frontal hieratic Mary, of the 'seat of wisdom', as cherished by the Catalan Churches. The central Italian cities developed a rich and resounding vernacular devotional style in celebrating Mary through recitation of her praises – *laude* – in confraternities, a phenomenon unknown elsewhere. Even the rosary, Mary's aid in prayer, created at the end of the medieval period, was a northern product that took long to penetrate the habits of southern Europeans. Even more than was true for their habits in governance, warfare and business, Europeans recognised a family resemblance to others as they travelled Europe for trade, diplomacy or pilgrimage, but there was also a strong local sense, bolstered by linguistic difference and liturgical traditions, in the regional religious cultures of Europe. Belief and practice could show unity in one sense (geographic, social, linguistic) but diversity in another. Both unity and diversity may be perceived but take different forms or manifest themselves differently depending on the subject, place and so on. While institutional centralisation, the spread of the Mendicant orders, the international reach of the great universities and finally the printing press brought uniformity to the world of rules and doctrine, other dynamics in this period worked against uniformity, not least the breakthrough of the vernacular languages in devotional life, powerful 'national' monarchies supporting the salvation of their subjects, or the inexhaustible creativity of devotional life itself.

The beginning of this period coincides with momentous changes in the economic and political structures of Europe and in the quality of life of its people. Between 1000 and 1200 the population of Europe probably doubled. Thousands of new towns – mostly small market towns – developed, and new villages were planted on lands recently brought under plough. Europeans were on the move: trading, travelling on pilgrimage, settling recently conquered lands at the extremities of Europe – in Iberia, in the Baltic region – and their enterprises were facilitated by the organised direction offered by rulers and their officials. The educated men of the church were deeply involved in all these enterprises: they advised kings, managed ecclesiastical estates, negotiated treaties and acted as judges. The leading intellectuals theorised the tenets upon which a Christian society – *societas Christiana* – might and ought to conduct its affairs. The twelfth century saw the seminal formulations of fundamental institutions which were to affect Christian lives for centuries:

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the meaning of the sacraments, the just price and reward for labour, the terms of Christian marriage, the nature of clerical celibacy and the appropriate lifestyle for priests.

The co-emergence of ecclesiastical and secular administrations was a battlefield of ideas and personalities. Already in the formative era of the Christian Empire – the fifth century – emperor and bishop of Rome discoursed on the relative weight and honour that each office held. There were complex issues of demarcation to be settled over legal jurisdiction and the right to collect taxes, for both kings and pope claimed the right to do so and depended on the resources raised from the same peoples. So a field of competition as well as emulation developed between the church's bureaucracy, the system through which saving grace was disseminated to Christians, and the states – kingdoms, city-states, principalities – that secured property through justice and protected life and limb. These spheres were intricately linked not least through the powerful institution of sacred kingship, but also in their parallel aims to regulate aspects of family, sexual morality and inheritance. In their mutual commitment to the underlying Christian ethos of the communities they ruled and served, church and state combined in efforts to define and correct religious deviation, and in the related challenge of locating the Jews within Christian polities.

The integrated Europe of the high Middle Ages adhered increasingly to the model of parish Christianity. While the most renowned and well-documented institutions were religious houses of various orders, most Christians experienced religious life within a community of village or urban neighbourhood, a parish into which they were born and with which they were associated for the rest of their lives. All the efforts to expand and deepen Christian teaching and instruction – and this period sees the series of ecumenical councils which defined and disseminated the terms of this project – directed attention to the parish and its servant, the parish priest. Teaching of the basics of faith began at home and continued in the parish; confession, penance and annual communion followed; marriage was directed towards the parish, and at the end of life burial and commemoration too. The priest was charged with the many tasks of celebrating the liturgy, visiting the sick, instructing the young, supporting the poor, ministering to the dying, alongside the maintenance of his parish's income from land, livestock, rents and tithes.

In rural communities the unit of agrarian work, lordship and parish often coincided to create a meaningful space of social interaction through communal religious life. In urban centres, where some 10–15 per cent of Europeans lived, the possibilities for expression of religious interests were more diverse.

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Some regions of Europe, like central and northern Italy and the Low Countries, were highly urbanised, and within cities and towns experiments in new forms of religious life for the laity – men and women – took place. From these urban settings emerged a type of female religious, the beguine – a woman committed to religious perfection within the world, in a life that combined prayer, meditation, service and work. The friar was a creation of these cities too: above all the Franciscan model of the poor, begging man, whose personal example was combined powerfully with effective preaching in order to turn Christians into committed Christians, that is, to convert souls. Various forms of confraternal life also transcended the parish, as lay people combined to explore old themes in new ways – the Passion, Mary's life, *Corpus Christi* – with expert guidance in religious poetry, drama and music from the specialists, the friars. This is a period of enormous creativity, as Europe's wealth and inventive energies, its many materials – marble, alabaster, wood, pearls, gold and silver – were worked into visual and tactile representations of the Christian story. This volume includes chapters on the visual arts and music too. The religious life of medieval Europe was full of rhythm and song, light and colour. Since its practices and ideas were mediated through efforts that made them tangible and sensual, some critics – like John Wyclif – considered them to verge on the idolatrous.

The calamities experienced in later medieval Europe, in the wake of the traumatic visitation of famine (1315–22), the Black Death (1347–50) and the recurrent waves of plague in subsequent decades, only served to enhance the intensity of preoccupation with death and the afterlife. It left a depleted European population, but also opened opportunities for those who remained. Politics and communities leapt to associations between disaster and moral danger: the Black Death led to attacks on Jews and to the annihilation of their communities throughout the Holy Roman Empire; a rhetoric grew perched upon the dialectic of purity and danger. A new style of European communication developed through a new type of preacher whose audience was no longer the people of a parish or a city, but whole regions. The papacy – caught up in its own struggles for self-definition throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – recruited and licensed charismatic preachers from among the ranks of the most enthusiastic and able friars and charged them with the work of reform, correction and exhortation, men like the friars Vincent Ferrer (d. 1419) or Giovanni da Capistrano (d. 1456). Cities and principalities appointed such performers to do the work of social discipline in their piazzas: like Bernardino in the cities of central Italy in the 1420s, or Savonarola in the 1490s. At the same time in the cities of north-west Europe

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civic authorities tended to prefer bourgeois self-help to public oratory; the more motivated among the literate urban population were served by a rich vernacular devotional literature: the *Mirror*, *Imitatio Christi*, the books of hours produced in their thousands in the workshops of Bruges, Ghent, Amiens and Antwerp; a somewhat larger group of lay men and women could turn to the dramatic spectacles crafted by chambers of rhetoricians or the mysteries of the Corpus Christi guilds.

Women and men participated vigorously and sometimes differently in the making of European Christianity between 1100 and 1500. A wide range of knowledge – medical, theological, legal – combined to form a robust and commonly held official wisdom about the inadequacy of women to think, to make moral judgements, to endure hardship, to exercise authority, and to lead. In this period, as in earlier medieval centuries, women were excluded from all orders of the church, minor and major, nor did they enjoy access to education within the institutions of learning that were associated with the church. Some women, usually of aristocratic backgrounds, sought religious perfection with nunneries, and a few became extremely distinguished for their mystical insights and exemplary lives: Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), Elisabeth of Schönau (d. 1164/65), Marie d'Oignies (d. 1213). As the period progresses, and in keeping with the trends in religious life already delineated, there is a wide diversity of manifestations of religious enthusiasm by women who were or had been married, by mothers with children, by young women of very modest backgrounds. The provision for women's sacramental needs was always a challenge: the priest had to enter their enclosures to hear confession and celebrate mass. Conversely, when women had something important to impart – prophecy, messages for reform, mystical revelations – they had to go about the world in a way that was not considered appropriate for women. Some, like Bridget of Sweden (d. 1373), managed the transition well, others, like Marguerite Porète (d. 1310) did not; she died at the stake as a relapsed heretic.

The very term 'heresy' was refined in this period to new precision. The legacy of early Christian legislation and some early medieval preoccupation with it was overhauled in this period to produce a system that combined identification, examination, attempts at correction, and ultimately punishment of those deemed to be 'heretics'. The task of protecting the faith, by punishing publicly those who knowingly and wilfully deviated from it, was the responsibility of bishops above all. To them parish priests were meant to present cases of people who spread their views and were resistant to correction. The bishop's court dealt with all serious infringements of church law,

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and they were charged with the protection of true belief. As the system of church law evolved and spread all over Europe, and as it was tightened, made uniform and added to periodically by new papal pronouncements, a whole body of law and practice on heresy grew. Since there was a sense from the twelfth century that in several parts of Europe the challenge was rather more profound, the papacy allowed for the creation of the inquisition in the 1230s, first manned by the recently established order of the Dominican friars. So southern France, Bohemia and northern Italy saw particularly concerted efforts at preaching against heresy and trials of those who persisted. Yet again, the political map of Europe displays variations in the reception of this institution: it never operated in England, and the Iberian monarchs only adopted it in the late fifteenth century. Still, a whole literature on the techniques of identification and interrogation was created by the inquisitors, for the training of future cohorts in the hope of making the system transparent, uniform and conforming to the principles of church law.

In this world of vast institutional and intellectual elaboration of the Christian story, where the Christian parish offered the fundamental frame for the lives of Europeans, there was a great deal of preoccupation with those who were not fully part of that world. The amount of imaginative effort and intellectual energy invested in thinking about Jews and Muslims was great, and it was intricately related to the vision of what a *societas Christiana* was and ought to be. Jews played a central role in the narratives of Christ's ministry and became more sharply drawn in this period as the knowing, and thus guilty, agents of the Passion. The traditional formulation of St Augustine, about the value of Jews as witnesses to Christian truth, as a crucial part of the unfolding Christian story unto its ends, was challenged in medieval Europe in towns and cities where Jews were constant reminders of the possibility of doubt. A vast literature of polemic, whose arguments were sometimes rehearsed by preachers from the pulpit, or in staged public disputations (Paris 1240, Barcelona 1263, Tortosa 1410), assisted the birth of elaborate narratives that cast Jews as enemies. Enemies of Christ at the birth of Christianity, they were now imagined as enemies of Europeans too: of their hallowed spaces, their cherished beliefs, and of their innocent children. This period saw the birth of the accusations of ritual murder, the blood libel and the host-desecration narrative too.

In Iberia, southern Italy, in Cyprus and in the Holy Land Christians encountered Jews for periods of time and observed their practice from neighbouring proximity. In Iberia Christian monarchs were conquering lands previously held by Muslims and were confronted with the challenges

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of ruling truly multi-ethnic communities. Conversion of Muslims to Christianity was actively encouraged and may have been perceived as more easily achievable than the conversion of the Jews. A vast literature cast the Muslim as a figure of romance and of violence. Dozens of stories circulated in Iberia, which involved the encounter between Muslims and the Virgin Mary. The efforts at achieving religious uniformity resulted by the very end of this period in expulsions of Jews and then Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula; by then Jews had been expelled from England, France and cities in Italy and the Empire.

The history of Christianity in Europe between 1100 and 1500 will be the product of several overlapping histories. These took place in parishes and universities, among men and women, learned people and illiterate enthusiasts; these are histories of the eruption of charisma within the routines of daily Christian life, of toleration as well as violent aggression. Everywhere we turn we encounter the efforts by papacy, bishops, theologians, poets and rulers, to define and then maintain the coherence and order of Christian Europe. These efforts coexisted with and even encouraged questions and doubts, as ideas were applied in daily life. The powerful model of sacramental Christianity was delivered to every Christian in Europe by ordained priests, the channels of saving grace. But it also confronted the challenges posed by the claim that matter could bear the divine, that a fallible human could be a channel of grace, that images carved in stone or painted on wood could assist contact with God. These questions were famously asked by Lollards in fourteenth-century England, by Hussites in fifteenth-century Bohemia, and in each case they prompted vigorous political responses from church and state. *Christianity in Western Europe c.1100–c.1500* aims to understand these creative dialectical processes. They shaped the lives of medieval Europe and, when Europeans intervened in the lives of people in the Americas, Africa and Asia, they became part of a global story too.

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PART I

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INSTITUTIONS AND CHANGE:

1100–1200

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