



1958

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "5. The Church and Heresy. Pt. III: The Medieval Church." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 51-57.

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5. The Church and Heresy

Abstract

In the centuries which followed its recognition by the Roman Empire, the Church had gradually developed a body of doctrine by which to interpret its faith and answer its critics. Once that doctrine was firmly established, those Christians who held contrary beliefs could be branded as heretics. In spite of this, the Western Church was never completely without its critics: Arians, Donatists, and many others. As soon as one doctrine was approved, questions were raised about some other aspect of the faith. The very interpretation of life which the Church offered, with its division into the secular and heavenly levels, seemed to foster this almost continual questioning and criticism. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, Church, God, Faith, Religious Society

Disciplines

History of Christianity | History of Religion | History of Religions of Western Origin | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section III: The Medieval Church](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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5. The Church and Heresy

In the centuries which followed its recognition by the Roman Empire, the Church had gradually developed a body of doctrine by which to interpret its faith and answer its critics. Once that doctrine was firmly established, those Christians who held contrary beliefs could be branded as heretics. In spite of this, the Western Church was never completely without its critics: Arians, Donatists, and many others. As soon as one doctrine was approved, questions were raised about some other aspect of the faith. The very interpretation of life which the Church offered, with its division into the secular and heavenly levels, seemed to foster this almost continual questioning and criticism.

The Church's usual method of dealing with serious criticism can be observed in the history of monasticism. The Benedictine, Cluniac, Cistercian, and similar movements were attempts to follow what was considered to be a more excellent way to express the Christian faith. [The Church's response to them was threefold. It first gave its approval, after carefully weeding out any heretical tendencies in their teaching. Then it incorporated them into an order which became one more organ within its total body. Finally, it put them to work at tasks which needed to be done. In this way the Church benefited from its critics and turned their strength to its own advantage.]

[The growth of towns which began in the eleventh century produced a new class of people who fitted neither into the structure of medieval society nor into the Church as it was then organized. They had left agrarian parishes for places where the Church was as yet largely unorganized. Searching for worldly rather than heavenly gain, they became urban and cosmopolitan in outlook. They were apt to be critical of the Church or irreligious, or both. Their criticisms focused on the Church's wealth, which appeared incongruous with its general attitude toward commerce and with the worldly conduct of many of its clergy. From these criticisms came the serious heresies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, of which the Cathari and the Waldensian are the most important.]

[There were two major sources upon which these heresies drew. One was the Biblical demand for a life of apostolic simplicity and poverty, long the major inspiration of the monastic movements. The other was the old philosophical distinction between spirit and matter, good and evil, the eternal and the temporal. While the Biblical emphasis found its main expression among the Waldensians and the philosophical among the Cathari, neither of these movements was uninfluenced by the thought of the other.]

Schismatic - split, but not heretics

Heretic - believed, but went astray

Infidel - pagan one who never believed

A number of heretics came from within the Church.

Never able to become a European-wide force.

Dualism

Southern France
 The earliest of the major heresies was that of the Cathari (the Pure, in our sense of the word "puritan"). It appeared in western Europe as early as the eleventh century and resulted from contact with the East, especially with the Balkans, where Manichaeism had never completely died out. The Cathars believed that the universe was under the dominion of two antithetical powers, the good and the evil, the spiritual and the physical, and that these were represented by the God of the New Testament and the God of the Old. This world was seen as a battleground between these two powers and the aim of life as the release of the spirit from the body. Christ was the pure spirit who accepted the commission of the good God to bring the news of deliverance to men trapped in this world by the law of the Old Testament God, Jehovah.

I thought the church was bad for them.

The Cathars were divided into two groups: the Pure (or Perfect) and the Believers. The Pure owned no property, fasted frequently, ate nothing which was the result of sexual activity (fish were acceptable due to their ignorance of natural history), and, if they had been married, gave it up for a life of complete celibacy. They refused to take oaths or to kill anything, the latter practice resulting from their belief in the transmigration of souls. Because of the material aspect present in them, they rejected the sacraments. However, they substituted one of their own, the consolamentum, after receiving which they were supposed to be able to live a life of absolute perfection. About all that was required of the Believers was that they venerate the Pure. Outwardly they could conform to the requirements of the Church. However, before dying they were to receive the consolamentum. They believed that, if they failed in this, they would be forced to wander through cycles of reincarnation until at last they emerged purified.

connection with the East. Manichaeism Orient Revival of trade

The Cathari were strongest in northern Italy and southern France, where their major centers were Toulouse and Albi (hence the term "Albigensian" often used to describe them). Here the deplorable condition of the clergy encouraged anticlericalism and stood in sharp contrast with the asceticism of the Pure. The Cathari attracted the allegiance of many townsmen, both rich and poor, as well as some noblemen. Their power can be judged from the fact that they were able to hold their own council in Toulouse in 1167. Clearly, they represented a major threat to the unity and universality of the medieval Church.

The second major heresy was the Waldensian. It stemmed from Peter Waldo, a wealthy merchant of Lyons. Apparently he had begun translating the Bible into the vernacular when, about 1170, his interests took a different direction. He sold all his goods and gave the money to the poor, bade goodbye to his wife, and went forth to preach. He was soon joined by others: merchants, noblemen, and even some clergymen. The teachings of the Waldensians, or Poor Men of Lyons, were grounded in an attempt to return to the simplicity of the early Church. Unlike the Cathari, they believed in one God, and not in two. At first they stressed lay preaching, apostolic poverty, penitence,

*Waldensians still exist
 Claim they are the first protestants*

fasting, and knowledge of the Bible, literally interpreted. The pope, unwilling to alienate such a movement, approved their poverty and preaching (1179), provided they first obtain permission of the local clergy. But this formality was often overlooked by the Waldensians and sometimes refused by the clergy. The result was papal condemnation in 1184 and, when Waldo refused to stop preaching, he was excommunicated.]

[Thereafter, Waldensian hostility toward the Church grew more inclusive, dogmatic, and widespread. They denied the Church's right to hold property. They insisted that the sacraments should not be administered by unworthy priests and that, indeed, ordination was not absolutely necessary in order to preach or administer the sacraments.] They refused to take oaths or bear arms. Meanwhile, their preaching was enthusiastically received in the same general areas where Cathari strength was to be found, as well as in parts of Spain and Germany.]

[The Church's first approach to these two movements was to try absorbing them. But this did not work; the Cathari could not be turned into a new monastic order and the Church soon rejected the Waldensians. Then it tried persuasion, which was directed mainly at the Cathari, whom it regarded as the more dangerous. Over a period of about half a century, such missionaries as St. Bernard (1090-1153) and St. Dominic (1170-1221) were sent into southern France, but to little avail. Innocent III (1198-1216) considered the Cathari enough of a threat to Christendom to justify his serious attention. He sent many of his legates to see what could be done. He called upon the local bishops to act, but for one reason or another their efforts were less than energetic. He had similar difficulty rallying the southern French nobility, who tended to sympathize with the Cathari and saw no reason to exterminate them. Nor was he in any position to appeal to the townsmen. His opportunity to act came after one of the legates was murdered in 1208. A crusade was preached in northern France, in the course of which full indulgences were granted the crusaders, who were assured that it was as meritorious to take the cross against the heretic as against the infidel (one who had never been a Christian). The property of the heretics was declared to be unprotected, which meant that it was available for the taking.]

The Albigensian Crusade, which began in 1209, quickly degenerated into a scramble for land and power, in much the same way as the Fourth Crusade. Northern nobles seized lands and set themselves up as feudal lords. When a papal official was asked whether in storming a city care should be taken to spare the faithful in it, he replied: "Kill them all! Kill them all! God will know his own." Some of the Cathari received the consolamentum and submitted meekly to their fate. One of the blackest stories in the whole history of Western Christendom finally came to an end by a treaty in 1229, which awarded much of southeastern France to the French monarchy. The crusade had

little reforms turning up every where.

broken the society which harbored the heresy. [Now it remained to ferret out those individual heretics who had escaped slaughter. A council at Toulouse in 1233 set up the machinery of the Inquisition, which was to accomplish just that and deal with any future heretics who might threaten the Church.]

The Inquisition, therefore, represents another method of combating heresy. The idea and some of the procedure antedate the year 1233, but only then did the Inquisition emerge as a separate organ of the Church. At first placed under the jurisdiction of the bishops, it was soon made directly dependent upon the papacy and manned by some of the pope's most loyal servants. Upon arrival in an area, the Inquisitors first declared a period of grace, during which time people were free to confess their own unorthodox opinions. Those who did so were given light punishments. Since the Church had declared that communities were responsible for the doctrines of their members, people were encouraged to report on the unorthodox opinions of others. Those who were thus singled out and who had not come forward were brought in to answer the charges made against them (the charges were called the diffamatio). Their accusers were not identified nor were the accused given legal counsel. However, if they succeeded in identifying any of their accusers, the testimony which the latter had given was deleted from the proceedings. The Inquisitors often used torture in trying to extract confessions. Those who finally confessed were given varying punishments: fines, imprisonment, long pilgrimages, or a public flogging. Those who did not confess might be turned over to the secular arm to be burned. Temporal officials were expected to perform such services for the Church on pain of excommunication. The property of convicted heretics was confiscated and often divided between church and state. While this pattern varied, these stages were typical of the procedure of the Inquisition. *Used Roman Law.*

[Many of the Inquisitors were members of a new order, the Dominican, founded by St. Dominic, a Spanish monk who appreciated the problem of heresy from the first-hand experience of a decade as missionary in southern France (1205-1215). Despite the decision of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) that there should be no new orders, the pope in 1216 confirmed the Order of Friars Preachers, which Dominic had organized. Gathering about him like-minded men who were willing to take the vow of apostolic poverty, Dominic undertook to attack heresy in two ways. [First, the Dominicans would provide an example of loyal churchmen who were as pure as the Cathari best. Second, they would be prepared to defend the orthodox position in a reasoned, consistent way, something which the secular clergy had been largely unable to do.] Dominic himself was never an Inquisitor. The Dominicans (and the Franciscans, founded about the same time) were called friars, or brothers, to distinguish them from the monks who remained within monastery walls. As preachers, they tried to disseminate pure doctrine in town and countryside. As Inquisitors, they tried to prevent the spread of false doctrine. As missionaries, they sought to carry the faith to the

*Agnes was a Dominican (theology)
Preaching, theology, & inquisition*

*Inquisition was not found every where.
Sporadic*

East in the wake of the Crusades. Finally, as teachers in the medieval universities, they labored to provide Christendom with an intellectual leadership which subsumed everything beneath sound doctrine. Together with the Franciscans, whom we shall meet in the following chapter, these "hounds of God" bolstered up the Church at a time when it was being sorely tried.

Crusade and Inquisition virtually eliminated the Cathari and drove the Waldensians from the cities. But even these strong methods were not enough to exterminate heresy root and branch. Cathar ideas went underground and reappeared in the form of music and literature. The Waldensians retreated into remote Italian mountain fastnesses, from which a late fifteenth century crusade failed to dislodge them and where their simple communities can be visited even today. Their claim to be the first Protestants must be given careful consideration. Finally, the heretical tendencies illustrated by these two groups represent a continuing feature in the life of the late medieval Church. In the sixteenth century these tendencies effected a rupture of Christendom.

Particularly in the last century or two, the usual response to the methods of the Inquisition has been revulsion. Before such judgment is attempted, it would be well to try understanding these methods in the context of their times. The medieval Church was trying to build a Christian society by incorporating that society within itself. It assumed that fallen man needed an authority in matters relating to his faith. It claimed that, guided by the continued presence of the Holy Spirit, it could determine between truth and error. It assumed the responsibility to God for promoting truth and eradicating error. It identified heresy and treason. Something similar to the Inquisition was a logical consequence of such presuppositions. In understanding the position of the Church, we can do no better than turn once again to Thomas Aquinas, himself a Dominican, though not an Inquisitor:

Tolerate heretics

[Objection 1. ^{Paul} It seems that heretics ought to be tolerated. For the Apostle says (2 Tim. ii. 24, 25): The servant of the Lord must not wrangle, ... with modesty admonishing them that resist the truth, if peradventure God may give them repentance to know the truth, and they may recover themselves from the snares of the devil. Now if heretics are not tolerated but put to death, they lose the opportunity of repentance. Therefore it seems contrary to the Apostle's command.

Obj. 2. Further, Whatever is necessary in the Church should be tolerated. ^{Paul} Now heresies are necessary in the Church, since the Apostle says (1 Cor. xi. 19): There must be ... heresies, that they ... , who are reprov'd, may be manifest among you. Therefore it seems that heretics should be tolerated.

Obj. 3. Further, The Master commanded his servants (Matth. xiii. 30) to suffer the cockle to grow until the harvest, i.e. the end of the world, as a gloss explains

it. Now holy men explain that the cockle denotes heretics. Therefore heretics should be tolerated.

On the contrary, The Apostle says (Tit. iii. 10, 11): A man that is a heretic, after the first and second admonition, avoid: knowing that he, that is such an one, is subverted.

I answer that, With regard to heretics two points must be observed: one, on their own side, the other, on the side of the Church. On their own side there is the sin, whereby they deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be severed from the world by death. For it is a much graver matter to corrupt the faith which quickens the soul, than to forge money, which supports temporal life. Wherefore if forgers of money and other evil-doers are forthwith condemned to death by the secular authority, much more reason is there for heretics, as soon as they are convicted of heresy, to be not only excommunicated but even put to death. *He's hurting himself now since worse fate. endangering the faith of others*

On the part of the Church, however, there is mercy which looks to the conversion of the wanderer, wherefore she condemns not at once, but after the first and second admonition, as the Apostle directs: after that, if he is yet stubborn, the Church no longer hoping for his conversion, looks to the salvation of others, by excommunicating him and separating him from the Church, and furthermore delivers him to the secular tribunal to be exterminated thereby from the world by death. For Jerome commenting on Gal. v. 9, A little leaven, says: Cut off the decayed flesh, expel the mangy sheep from the fold, lest the whole house, the whole paste, the whole body, the whole flock, burn, perish, rot, die. Arius was but one spark in Alexandria, but as that spark was not at once put out, the whole earth was laid waste by its flame.

Reply Obj. 1. This very modesty demands that the heretic should be admonished a first and second time: and if he be unwilling to retract, he must be reckoned as already subverted, as we may gather from the words of the Apostle quoted above.

Reply Obj. 2. The profit that ensues from heresy is beside the intention of heretics, for it consists in the constancy of the faithful being put to the test, and makes us shake off our sluggishness, and search the Scriptures more carefully, as Augustine states (De Gen. cont. Manich. i. 1). What they really intend is the corruption of the faith, which is to inflict very great harm indeed. Consequently we should consider what they directly intend, and expel them, rather than what is beside their intention, and so, tolerate them.

Reply Obj. 3. According to Decret. xxiv. (qu. iii., can. Notandum), to be excommunicated is not to be uprooted. A man is excommunicated, as the Apostle says (I Cor. v. 5) that his spirit may be saved in the day of Our Lord. Yet if heretics be altogether uprooted by death, this is not contrary to Our Lord's command, which is to be understood as referring to the case when the cockle cannot be plucked

up without plucking up the wheat, as we explained above
(Q. X., A. 8, ad 1), when treating of unbelievers in
general. *

* The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, Ltd.), IX, 153-155. Used with permission of the publisher and of Benziger Brothers, Inc.

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