

Western European Religion – Postclassical Period

Overview The ancient Greco-Roman world, in the West, gave way only gradually to the pressures brought against it from its own economic weaknesses, the gradual slow down in cultural and religious vigor, and the pressures brought by a dominant new religious perspective, which brought with it subversive new energies. So gradual was this transition, from the culture of the Roman Empire to the outlines of a ‘Christian’ Middle Ages, that stretched from Ireland to India, that for at least four centuries after the collapse of Rome its culture might have appeared essentially ‘old style Roman Empire’ to the observer from within. Christianity had, however, arrived at the gates, and had at least since the third century A.D. been remodeling Roman society from within.

The early Middle Ages The outer history of the early Christianization of Western Europe can be said to have peaked with the coronation of Charlemagne on Christmas Day in 800 A.D., with the blessing of Pope Leo III. With this act the Carolingian Renaissance, a true flowering of Christianized culture, was inaugurated; while behind that milestone lay the hard centuries during which Christianity had fought its way from persecuted sect status--in Rome, Antioch, Corinth--to the stage of major doctrinal gatherings, most importantly the first Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.), which was convened by the Emperor Constantine, in order to clarify crucial doctrinal issues, and to consolidate the extant membership of the Church.

Toward the High Middle Ages The growth of the Christian Church, in the centuries following the coronation of Charlemagne, involved many developmental aspects: the full spread of the faith over the areas of both the Western and the Eastern branches of Christianity--Constantine having established the Church in the East, in 330 C.E.; the convening of seven major Councils between 325-787 C.E., gatherings at which the shaping presences of the Church met to hammer out theological doctrine; the growth of missionary outreach from within the Church--instructional and spiritual missions fanning out to places like Ireland and Wales, later Scandinavia; the burgeoning of monastic orders--the Order of Saint Benedict (6th century C.E.), the formation of the Cistercian and Franciscan orders (12th and 13th centuries C.E.), which deepened and spread the Christian faith, multiplying the efforts made, throughout ‘Christendom’ to extend the faith on the humble parish level; the construction of the great Gothic Cathedrals-- Notre Dame de Paris (1163), Chartres (1200), Reims (1211)--which both consolidated and expressed the faith of ordinary believers; the first Universities, all of them spin offs of Cathedral life--in Bologna, Oxford, Paris; finally, and perhaps most important, the outpouring of philosophical thought--Saint Thomas (1225-1274), Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274), Albertus Magnus (1200-1280)--in which the Christian beliefs about the Revelation, the Resurrection, Grace, Sin, and Sanctity are organized into theological concepts, and appropriately inter related with one another.

Afterthought A major religion is a comprehensive organization of human society: social, economic, philosophical, artistic, architectural--even, we might say today, environmental, for the way a religion builds and develops is at the same time a new history of the human attitudes toward the land. Post classical Christianity, commonly called Mediaeval, did not begin sharply with the death of its Savior, nor did it end with the urbanization, slow secularization, and new means of communication, which marked the early Renaissance of the 13th century and after. A major religion flows out of its past, and into its future, without a break in the continuity of human experience.

Reading

Bokenkotter, Thomas, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, New York, 2004.

Esler, Philip, *The Early Christian World*, London, 2004.

Discussion questions

What was the role of the Roman Emperor Constantine, in launching and then supporting the growth of the Christian Church? What was the effect, of the Church, on building a new frontier for itself in Constantinople?

Did the development of the institution of the Christian Church promote the development of nationalities, in Europe, or did it foster a 'universalist' influence, rising 'above' nationalism?

What was the role of the Crusades, in solidifying the secular power of Christian believers? Were the Crusades largely an economic movement, or were they truly, on the whole, devoted to 'recovering the Holy Land?'