

## EUROPEAN CULTURAL HISTORY – Postclassical Period

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### Western European Science – Postclassical period

**Overview** The development of anything like empirical science--systematic observation, hypothesizing and experimentation-- had to await 13th century thinkers like Roger Bacon, who, together with many others like Robert Grosseteste or Albertus Magnus, were starting to probe the natural world with questions unleashed from the earlier mediaeval assumptions that the natural world was best understood as an expression of the mind of God. The scientific attitude was beginning to prevail, by the time of Dante.

**The early period** *The Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville (580-636 C.E.) can were the most influential text for 'scientific knowledge' in the early period of Mediaeval science. The scientific knowledge available to the Greco-Roman world--the works of Hippocrates, the Greek mathematicians, Galen the physician, Euclid and Ptolemy--were lost from sight in the world of Isidore, whose gigantic compendium simply drew on earlier encyclopedias, to create what to us seems an indiscriminate jumble of 'facts.' The fantasy element in many of these facts can be illustrated: 'The race of the Sciopodes is said to live in Etiopia. They have one leg apiece and are of a marvelous swiftness, and the Greeks call them Sciopodes from this, that in summertime they lie on the ground on their backs, and are shaded by the greatness of their feet.' The 'progress' of mediaeval science can be measured by the distance from Isidore of the *Speculum maius* of Vincent of Beauvais (1190-1264 C.E.), the chief encyclopedia of the later mediaeval period. This text, three times the size of Isidore's, is a compendium of the--by that time--wide range of Greco-Roman scientific works available in Latin, in translations from Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew.

**Later Mediaeval science** With the opening up of the Byzantine and Near Eastern worlds to the West, in the trade and commerce expanding world of 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe, there came a steady flow of translated texts from Greek and Arabic into Latin. Aristotle reentered the western bloodstream, and with Ptolemy, Euclid, and many others became the fountainhead of discovery work in math, science, geography, astronomy and astrology, and medicine.

**Mathematics and physics** By the early 12<sup>th</sup> century the *Elements* of Euclid appeared in the west in Latin translation, while translated Arabic knowledge of algebra opened the door to numerous new insights, including the exceptionally brilliant work of Leonard of Pisa, who introduced the Hindu-Arabic numerical system to the West, and whose reintroduction of the ancient *abacus*, for purposes of calculating, brought algebra to the point 'from which it was not to make notable advances until the sixteenth century.' (Haskins, *The Renaissance of the 12th century*, p. 312.) Those minds concerned with physics found themselves debating the conflicting claims between then recently accessible Aristotelian texts, like his *Physics* and *Meteorology*, both of which were available by the second half of the twelfth century, and Plato's *Timaeus*, which introduced a totally diverse cosmology from Aristotle's.

**Geography** While the geographical theory of the late Middle Ages reflected little input from such expeditions as the Crusades, there was much observational material owing to individual travelers. Among the known and familiar lands of the west, travelers like Giraldus Cambrensis, in his *Topography of*

*Ireland* (1188), 'gives us much first-hand description of lakes, rivers, mountains, ...the tidal phenomena of the coasts of the Irish sea....,' while discussing the customs of the inhabitants, which--as Taine might have said, eight centuries later-- coordinated closely with the kinds of landscape in which they lived.

**Astrology** Widely accepted as a branch of science, astrology--a 'humanized astronomy'--was strongly revived in the twelfth century. Not only did astrology serve purely speculative ends, like the prediction of personal traits based on star positions at one's birth, but the higher astrology--there were Professors of Astrology in major Universities--served as a portal through which to observe the movements of the constellations, to calculate the major solar and lunar events that shaped the Church (and other) calendars, and to supervise and organize military campaigns.

**Medicine** By the twelfth century mediaeval scholars had recovered all the essential texts of ancient Greek medicine, the writings of mediaeval Arab physicians had been translated into Latin, and the first medical school in western Europe, the University of Salerno, was functioning strongly. By the tenth century, Salerno had been a noted healing center, and by the twelfth century a substantial medical literature was being created in Salerno--much of it on pharmacology and diseases of the eye--which drew on the presence and researches of physicians based firmly not only in Latin, but in Greek and Arabic.

### Readings

Crombie, A.C., *Augustine to Galileo: The History of Science, AD 400-1650*, Harmondsworth, 1969.

Lindberg, David C., *Science In the Middle Ages*, Chicago, 1978.

### Discussion questions

The role of translators, in bringing Greek and Arabic science to 12th century Europe, was very important. Who were these translators? Did they come from various countries? Who hired them?

Alchemy, as well as astronomy, played a fringe role in the development of modern science. What did alchemy contribute to the development of science during the Middle Ages?

What was the role of surgery, in mediaeval western medicine? Was it widely practiced? What kind of implements and sanitary precautions were available? What were the main centers of surgical practice?

### Western European Art : Postclassical Period

**Overview** When Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire, under the Emperor Constantine's reign (306-337 C.E.), it was necessary, and at last possible, for worship to take place openly in public. The furtive structures formerly in use, when Christianity was proscribed, began to be replaced by sizeable places of worship, churches, in which large groups of celebrants could gather. At the same time, the early Christian squeamishness about idols, which had hampered a full flowering of aesthetic achievement, was giving way to a more self-confident urge toward religious self-expression. In what follows we can indicate certain landmarks that show the path the Mediaeval Church took toward the grand cathedral-building era of the thirteenth century.

**Early post classical art in Europe: the Christian basilica** The basilica of Roman times was a large public temple in which court matters and official urban matters could be addressed; every significant city in the Roman Empire had its basilica. From the Roman basilica slowly emerged the Christian basilica. One of the earliest Christian basilicas in Rome was Santa Maria Maggiore, built around 430 C.E. Like a Roman basilica, Santa Maria Maggiore is a long rectangular structure entered through a gate which leads into an atrium, or roofless open space. Within the Roman atrium stood a statue of the Emperor; the Christians replaced this with a 'bishop's chair,' or *cathedra*, whence eventually came the

name *cathedral*, applied to the entire building. Elegant mosaics of stone and glass adorned the Christian basilica walls, and the ceilings were of polished marble. Such attention to detail befitted the long nave, which at its far end, the target point of the visitor's eyes, surrounded the altar on which the transformative actions of the mass were carried out.

**An early sculptural example** Wary of idol worshipping, the early Christians shied away from sculptural art or painting. There are, however, fine pieces of sculpture or relief work, in which the human body is subtly molded. A fine example is a 39" tall sculpture of Jesus the Good Shepherd, depicted in the innocence of a Roman youth, over his shoulders a lamb being carried to safety.

**The Middle period of post classical Christian art** The art of this period--Romanesque by name, especially as it pertains to architecture--flourished broadly throughout France, and brings us squarely into the architectural tradition which will lead to the great Cathedrals of the thirteenth century. However the Romanesque tradition stops firmly short of the vaulting and daringly lighted effects of the High Gothic, which we will see in the Cathedrals of Notre Dame de Paris or Chartres, in the thirteenth century. A beautiful instance of Romanesque is the Cathedral of Saint Sernin at Toulouse, constructed around 1070. Less lofty than the Gothic, more given to side aisles and chapels for the veneration of saints' relics, and with clearly defined spatial divisions--rather than with the fluidity of the Gothic--Saint Sernin is a classical statement of Romanesque Architecture.

**The thirteenth century climax of post classical Christian art** The Gothic cathedrals of the High Middle Ages--Notre Dame of Amiens (begun 1220), Notre Dame of Paris (1163-1250), Notre Dame of Chartres (1145-1220)--are familiar to us for unique features--flying buttresses, gargoyles, devotional chapels, but above all for high vaulting ceilings, ethereal mosaics that pick up every radiance from outside, and forests of brilliantly interwoven columns, each perfectly positioned to shape and pattern the worshippers' view down the nave to the altar. These are among the architectural masterpieces constructed at least in part by the labor and ardor of the people of the region, for whom the presence of such architectural exaltation made daily life meaningful.

## Reading

Stoddard, Whitney, *Art and Architecture in Mediaeval France*, New York, 1972.

Madigan, Kevin, *Medieval Christianity: A New History*, New Haven, 2015.

## Discussion questions

How do you explain the fact that post classical Christian culture, in the West, achieves a kind of climax of brilliance in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, after more than a thousand years of 'development'?

Why do you suppose architecture was the art form in which the mediaeval Christian Church most fully expressed itself?

Was there cultural energy even in the 'dark ages' of the 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, in Western Europe. Is that moniker, 'dark ages', justified, or simply a label pasted on by a later, and uncomprehending age, like the 18<sup>th</sup> century?

## 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 (6<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), the formation of the Cistercian and Franciscan orders (12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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?'

### **Post Classical Philosophy: Western Europe**

**Overview** Classical Greco Roman philosophy matured in the fourth century B.C.E. with the rich harvest of thought gathered in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and yet there was much systematic thinking, in the classical world, that followed the achievements of the fourth century. There were the Stoics and Epicureans, the Pythagoreans, and in early years C.E. the Gnostics, who typified the new thirsts for salvation through belief. It was not until Saint Augustine, in the fifth century C.E., that the shape of a post-classical western European philosophy began to emerge. It was a philosophy touched, from the start, by the determination to think in terms of the Christian revelation. Therefore, since that revelation, which made the world look different, had occurred only 'recently,' much realignment of speculative thought was necessary, before a pertinent new philosophy could be formulated. We mention three stages of that reformulation.

**Saint Augustine** Still a Roman citizen, still--as he reveals in his Autobiography, *The Confessions* (400 C.E.)--torn between the desires of the flesh and the desires of spirit, this Bishop of Hippo, in North Africa, wrote voluminously of the relationships between man and god, and in particular of the presence of sin, the Fall, in human behavior. He moved out, from this concern with sinfulness, into close examinations of the moral life, the individual's responsibility to community, the devastating counterpressures exercised by the evil in the daily. While he considered himself a man of god, a theologian, his finesse in advancing and critiquing his own points led him into issues of logic, epistemology, and 'mindfulness' which constantly cross the line into what we would today call 'philosophy.'

**The formation of a Christian philosophy** Saint Augustine wrote at a time when the harsh consequences of major cultural transformation were starting to be widely felt. The schools and academies of ancient learning, which had been of some but declining influence in the Roman Empire itself, were giving way to the anomalies of economic, social, and cultural decline. Education itself was in peril and the brilliant efforts of an individual, like Augustine, long lay in abeyance, awaiting the consolidation of Christian learning and thought, which was being kept alive, at least in the form of spiritual disciplines, by the monastic sects--Benedictines (founded 529 C.E.) and Franciscans (founded 1209 C.E.) being among the driving forces promoting education, devotional learning, and Biblical thinking. The thinkers central to monastic thought were scornful of 'philosophy,' which was often associated with the 'fallen thought' of Greece and Rome, preferring to think of themselves as 'theologians,' but were in fact philosophers, for in order to explain the relation of God to man they needed theories of the nature of thinking and the mind, arguments pertaining to ethical value and the moral life, and even conceptions of the place of the aesthetic in creation.

**Saint Thomas Aquinas and his world** It is far from Saint Benedict, in the sixth century C.E. to the apex of Western Postclassical thinking, in the thirteenth century. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 C.E.), the towering figure of this apex thinking, undertakes in his *Summa Theologiae* (*Essence of Theology*, 1485 C.E.) to synthesize the major themes of Christian life--God, Trinity, Creation, Grace, Sin, Will, Virtue--with precise logical thinking. To launch this synthesis Thomas drew on the slowly accumulated resources of his time: a spiritual climate--this was the age of great Cathedral Building in Europe; the seminal texts of Aristotle which had passed through Byzantine and Muslim translations, in Byzantium, and were being translated back into Latin; and the formative thinking of now earlier Christian philosophers, like John Duns Scotus (815-871 C.E.) and Saint Anselm (1033-1109 C.E.).

### **Readings**

Schoedinger, Andrew B., ed., *Oxford Readings in Mediaeval Philosophy*, Oxford, 1996.

Lagerlund, Henrik, *Encyclopedia of Mediaeval Philosophy between 500-1500*, Dordrecht, 2011.

### Discussion questions

What role did the first western universities play in the development of mediaeval western philosophy?

From Augustine to Saint Thomas Aquinas is a long time. What traces of Augustine's thought and sensibility remain in Saint Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*?

Saint Thomas drew heavily on the thought of Aristotle, whom he called simply 'the philosopher.' What are the main uses Thomas made of Aristotle's thought?

### Post Classical Literature: Western Europe

**Overview** Between the 'Fall of Rome,' arguably datable to the fifth century C.E., and the cultural-economic opening out we call the Renaissance, in the fifteenth century C.E., is long enough for literary styles to revise themselves many times, and so they did, although the pervasive influence of the Christian messages is everywhere noticeable. If we travel in mind among a half dozen selections from the literature of this extensive period, in which Western Europe passes through stages of virtual economic shutdown, Feudalism, slow recouping of trade energies, the 'rebirth' of classical awareness, and the spreading of the first western cities, there is space for immense reshaping of cultural perspectives. If we have any trouble believing this, we can refer to the changes in cultural perspective that punctuate the course of even a single century, in our frenetic contemporary world.

**Augustine** In the fifth century C.E., the prolific Bishop of Hippo, in North Africa, found both a perspective and a personal voice in which to create a personal literature unlike any created in the Greco-Roman world, with the possible exception of the writings of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, in his *Meditations* (161-180 C.E.). As we see most vividly in his *Confessions* (400 C.E.), Augustine writes from the heart to his Creator, before whom he confesses his weakness and susceptibility to sin. He writes a spiritual autobiography in which he recollects the sinful tendencies of his infancy, his youth, his hormonal sexual drives and actions, and the saving blessing reserved for him by his mother, who remained true to him throughout his spiritual wanderings. His discovery of the inner life begins and ends with such a thought as 'my sin is always before me,' from his masterwork, *The City of God* (426 C.E.)

**Beowulf** Three centuries after Augustine, the epic of *Beowulf* picks up the deep Christian currents, which have been percolating across the Christianization of western Europe. This mystery text, virtually unknown in the West until the 18th century, springs on us with the power of ancient classical epics--pitting the hero against misty forces of monstrous gloom, death, and political hostility, then moving us through deeply touching scenes into a sense of the hero's nobility. Beowulf is conscious, at all times, of his creatureliness, and even in the midst of prideful heroic battle, remains humbly conscious of his dependence on his maker. 'Most often He has guided the man without friends....' declares the poet, referring to the hero's lowliness, in a tone which would have blown away Homer's mind, as he takes us joyfully through the proud exultations of Odysseus.

**The Song of Roland** Fast forward two centuries from the murky Scandinavian/Anglian struggles of *Beowulf*, and you are reading a totally different Christian-flavored epic, featuring Roland the nephew of the French King Charlemagne. *The Song of Roland* (1040-1115 C.E.) was created at the time of the First Crusade, when France was eager to complete the expulsion of the Saracens from Spain, thus from Western Europe entirely. Roland and his troops, engaged in full scale battle against the 'invaders,' fight a

rear guard action in which ultimately they are routed--though by a last minute attack Charlemagne and his forces arrive for the rescue, and annihilate the Saracens. The 'preux chevalier', 'noble knight,' Roland is faced, in the course of this battle, with the choice of whether or not to blow his famed horn, which will be a cry for help; in his humble, and noble efforts to meet this challenge to his honor, Roland's god-fearing soul is laid bare on the table.

**Dante** Dante Alighieri completed his master epic, *The Divine Comedy*, in 1320 C.E. The wellsprings of personal godliness opened by Augustine, eight hundred years earlier, here find their narrative counterpart in an objective framework capable of capturing their intellectual power and emotional richness. Dante follows his mentors, Virgil and later Beatrice, along a series of paths and gaps in the long trail leading from the realms of reason, through those of Purgatory, to the final ascent into heavenly light, the divine Source. At every stage on the way Dante meets representatives of that particular level of brutality or spiritualization--sinners shining with the most brilliant autobiographies. Dante, a humble pilgrim, drags himself upward, though in constant dependence on 'divine guidance.'

**Chaucer** Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*(1476 C.E.) are deeply woven into a Christian culture, and turn upon a narrative as religiously shaped as Dante's narrative in the *Divine Comedy*. When Chaucer's parson declares the purpose of his tale to be

*...to guide your way one further stage  
Upon that perfect, glorious pilgrimage  
Called the celestial, to Jerusalem...*

he formulates a pure Christian motive for art. As with Dante, we are introduced, in Chaucer, to a loosely congregated sub section of the day's society. (Dante's 'characters' were both contemporary and historical, while Chaucer's are all contemporary.) While all of Chaucer's figures are on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury, and while the majority are not 'people of the cloth,' and some are pretty rough characters, the motif of Christian seeking remains thematic, and often, as in the words of the parson, decisive.

## Reading

Curtius, Ernst Robert, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Trask, Princeton, 1953.

Green, D.H., *Women Readers in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 2007.

## Discussion questions

We chose to track a 'religious theme' for guidance through the complexities of mediaeval literature. What other themes might serve the same purpose? Stylistic? Linguistic? Sociological?

Are Chaucer's *Tales*, which 'come at the end of the High Christian Era, essentially a social portrait which just happens to include Christian issues and personalities, as parts of the culture they are in? Or is Christianity a determining factor in the epic?

If you buy the notion that Augustine is a new kind of interior voyager, in western literature, where and how does Greco Roman literature find its own center of excellence? What kind of Greco-Roman works seem to you to be 'spiritual,' if any do?

