CHURCH HISTORY
Week Four: Early Medieval Christianity (590–1054)

Popular Religion

In the Greek-speaking East, popular Christian piety centered on the use of icons (pictorial representations of Christ and the saints). Technically speaking, icons represented the person depicted, so any prayers or other acts of veneration were made to the person of which the image was a reminder. Icons also served as a means of religious instruction in a semi-literate society. By the early 700s many Christians were opposing the use of icons, and even emperors went back and forth on the issue. Eastern Christians divided into two camps, iconoclasts and iconodules; both sides agreed icons of God the Father are a violation of the second commandment, but they disagreed about images of the man Jesus of Nazareth.

Iconodules argued that Christ’s human nature could be represented in an image because he has two natures and his divine nature is invisible anyway. Iconoclasts argued that it was heretical to divide Christ’s natures so artificially and any picture of the man Jesus was also a picture of the divine Son. Emperors and church leaders went back and forth for a half century, but in 787 a council sided with the Iconodules and made an official distinction between giving “honorable reverence” to icons and “true devotion” to God. Pope Hadrian agreed with the council, making the use of icons the official practice in both the East and the West.

Though icons were used in the West, popular religion was characterized even more by collecting of relics and making pilgrimages. Relics were personal possessions or body parts (!) associated with dead saints. Noteworthy relics included splinters from the true cross, vials of Mary’s breast milk, and the pickled hand of St. James. Pilgrimages were religious trips to allegedly holy sites. By far the most important place to visit on pilgrimage was Palestine, a fact that later contributed to the rise of the crusades. In the West, by far the most popular saint was Mary. Catholics often used rosary beads to pray to Mary, who was considered a mediator between humanity and Christ.

Formerly pagan festivals were increasingly Christianized throughout the early Middle Ages; what is now known as the Christian calendar was an effort to sanctify dates that were long associated with paganism. The earliest cathedrals were also built during this era. Cathedrals were intended to symbolize the reality that all of medieval society was under the eye of God. Every aspect of a cathedral pointed to the faith, from the stained glass windows to the very architecture itself, which was shaped like a cross and pointed to heaven.

The Photian Schism

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Eastern Orthodox Church was more or less the department of religious affairs under the Byzantine emperors. This had been the case since Justinian’s reign in the sixth century (527–65). Justinian was a devout believer, a firm proponent of missions, and a devoted patron of the arts; the famous Hagia Sophia in Constantinople was built during his reign. The close relationship between church and state led to a huge controversy in 858 when the emperor deposed Ignatius as Patriarch of Constantinople for running afoul of imperial politics.
The emperor replaced Ignatius with a rival named Photius. Many observers, including Pope Nicholas, opposed Photius’s consecration because of the political intrigue involved.

Photius responded by denouncing Pope Nicholas because of several differences between Christians in the East and West, especially the adoption of the so-called *filioque* clause, which the West had added to the Nicene Creed in 589. The Latin word *filioque* literally means “and the Son.” The Latin version of the Nicene Creed argued that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*), while Greek version claimed the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. The East resented the West unilaterally adding a phrase to the Nicene Creed.

Photius called a regional council in 867 that excommunicated Nicholas as pope, which dissolved relations between the pope and the patriarch. But that same year a new emperor came to power and deposed Photius and reinstated Ignatius as the patriarch. The pope remained unimpressed with all the political shenanigans. When Ignatius died in 878, Photius became his successor as patriarch and the new pope, John VIII, accepted his claim to the position, thus restoring relations between the papacy and the patriarchate. The so-called Photian Schism illustrated the growing rift between the East and the West, a rift that led to permanent schism 200 years later.

The “Holy Roman Empire”

Since the barbarian invasions of the fifth and sixth century, the West had been dominated by an agrarian culture wherein land equaled wealth. This agrarian emphasis gave rise to a system that historians call *feudalism*. In the feudal system, individuals of lesser wealth pledged themselves to serve individuals of greater wealth. The person of lesser wealth was called a *vassal*, while the person of greater wealth was the *patron*. In exchange for serving the patron (normally through military service and agricultural labor), the vassal was given a piece of land called a *fief*. In this system, peasants were vassals to knights, who were vassals to barons, who were vassals to counts, who were vassals to kings, who could be vassals to more powerful kings. Churches and monasteries were also involved, especially as dying Christians deeded their land to the church, which then established feudal relationships with peasants to work those lands.

The lack of a centralized government led to instability as powerful regional kings conquered lesser kings, establishing feudal relationships throughout the West. By the eighth century, modern-day France had theoretically been ruled by the Merovingian dynasty for several generations, though the king’s lord mayor was the de facto ruler. In 751, Pippin the Short became the lord mayor and sent a letter to the pope arguing that Pippin should be the king because he was the one who actually ruled. The pope agreed and deposed the Merovingian king and exiled him to a monastery. In 754, Pope Stephen II traveled to France and anointed Pippin and his sons as the new royal line. In exchange for this formal papal recognition of his power, Pippin agreed to be the military defender of Rome and donated considerable land (that he did not technically own) to the papacy—this land became the Papal States.

When Pippin died in 768, he was succeeded by his two sons, one of whom died in 771, leaving Charles as the sole ruler. Charles, called Charlemagne, set out to build a Franco-Roman Empire. Between 771 and 800, Charlemagne re-conquered much of the western lands that had been claimed by the barbarian tribes. He also conducted missions through military might, forcing
conquered pagans to accept baptism. He mandated the baptism of all infants before their first birthday; noncompliance carried the death penalty because of presumed paganism. During Charlemagne’s rule, the bishops of large cities became known as *archbishops*, which was a position in between mere bishops and the papacy, and a standardized liturgy was adopted in the West. His reign also inaugurated what some have called a “Carolingian Renaissance” that gave birth to renewed interest in education, theology, and the preservation of the best of ancient Greek and Roman cultures.

Charlemagne’s influence reached its height on December 25, 800, when Pope Leo III crowned him as emperor and then bowed before him—this sent mixed signals, since it was unclear who was submitting to whom. The coronation ceremony illustrated both the partnership between church and state and the tension it would cause throughout the Middle Ages. While future popes continued to crown emperors, Leo was the only pope to ever bow after the coronation. With Charlemagne as emperor, the West began to unify beyond local tribal kings and a further wedge was driven between East and West, since Charlemagne and his successors claimed they had no loyalty to the emperor in the East. Frequently, the coronation of Charlemagne is called the beginning of the Holy Roman Empire, but such an entity didn’t really exist; on paper, Charlemagne remained a subject of the Byzantine Empire.

### Theological Debates in the West

During the early Middle Ages, there were two key theological debates in the West. The first surrounded the Eucharist. Since at least the second century, some theologians have argued that Christ is physically present in the Lord’s Supper, though initially the doctrine of “real presence” was assumed more than it was defended. During the ninth century, a monk named Radbertus wrote a treatise titled *On the Body and the Blood of the Lord* wherein he argued that when the bread and wine are consecrated during communion the elements are transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ. Radbertus claimed that this transformation is mystical and unobservable to Christians participating in the sacrament.

Charles the Bald, who was one of Charlemagne’s successors as western emperor, disagreed with Radbertus’s conclusions and asked another monk named Ratramnus to write a response. Ratramnus agreed that Christ was present in communion, but claimed his presence was spiritual rather than physical. Ratramnus wanted to safeguard the biblical truth that Christ is now physically present at the right hand of the Father, even if he is spiritually present everywhere else, including communion. Radbertus’s views were later further developed into what became the doctrine of transubstantiation, while during the Reformation the Reformed tradition would revive Ratramnus’s view that Christ is spiritually present in the Eucharist.

The second major debate, also during the ninth century, concerned the doctrines of grace. Gottschalk was a Benedictine theologian who became interested in the writings of Augustine. Gottschalk embraced Augustine’s doctrine of double predestination and left his monastery to preach the doctrine itinerantly. Gottschalk is also the first theologian to *unambiguously* argue for the doctrine of limited atonement or particular redemption, though there were earlier theologians (like Augustine) who sometimes hinted at the doctrine without clearly arguing for it. Most Catholic theologians considered Gottschalk’s hard Augustinianism extreme, so a council in 849
condemned him as a heretic—he was forced to burn his books, renounce his ordination, and was imprisoned in a monastery for the last 20 years of his life. Despite the verdict on Gottschalk, there were several later medieval theologians who affirmed an Augustinian view of salvation, including at times double predestination and limited atonement.

The Great Schism

The Eastern and Western churches had been growing apart for centuries, and by the eleventh century they were marked by different languages, ethnicities, ecclesiologies, liturgies, and theological emphases like the *filioque*. Furthermore, there was widespread resentment on both sides because of the Photian Schism of two centuries earlier. Politically, the revival of the West after the time of Charlemagne alienated many in the East, as did the creation of the Papal States in the eighth century. Like the empire itself, what in theory was united as a whole was in reality divided into parts.

Michael Cerularius (1043–58) was the Patriarch of Constantinople and he resented the papacy because of the latter’s claims to supremacy. Michael believed that all of Europe was part of the Byzantine Empire, under the rule of the eastern emperor, and that all patriarchs (including the Bishop of Rome) were equal in power. Pope Leo IX (1049–54) believed Michael claimed too much power for Constantinople—he claimed Rome was the mother church of Christendom and those not in submission to Rome were synagogues of Satan. Both sides also disagreed on several theological matters, including clerical celibacy.

Emperor Constantine IX tried to intervene to avoid a formal schism, so in 1054 Leo sent three papal delegates to meet with the emperor and represent the papacy’s interests in the reconciliation attempts. One of Leo’s delegates, Humbert, was a champion of papal supremacy who resented the theological differences between the East and West. Humbert and his companions entered the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and, without Leo’s permission, laid a papal bull (formal pronouncement) on the altar excommunicating Michael, but declaring the emperor and the people of Constantinople orthodox. Michael responded by excommunicating the papal representatives. Leo never knew any of this had happened—he died before his representatives had excommunicated Michael, rendering the excommunications invalid!

The mutual excommunications have been called the Great Schism because they marked a lasting break between the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic movements. In reality, all the excommunications did was give a symbolic event to signify a division that had been slowly growing for over 500 years. The two churches have never permanently reunited, though on a couple of occasions they briefly reunited due to the threat of invasion by Muslims in the East. In 1965, the pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople canceled the excommunications of 1054, but they did not enact a formal reunion between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.