CHURCH HISTORY
Week Five: Late Medieval Christianity (1054–1500)

The Investiture Controversy

Pope Gregory VII (1073–85) was a moral reformer and a champion of papal supremacy. He claimed that the papacy not only exercised spiritual oversight over Christendom, but exercised temporal rule over all of Europe. In the mind of Gregory, the church was formally independent of the state, but the state deferred to the authority of the church. In contrast, Henry IV of Germany agreed that the church was independent of the state, but he also believed the church was under state supervision. Their different opinions became apparent when the bishopric of Milan became vacant; each man believed he had the right to invest (choose) the new bishop.

In 1075–76, Gregory and Henry took turns denouncing and excommunicating each other. The electoral princes in Germany saw an opportunity, so they gave Henry one year to resolve the conflict or they would elect a new emperor. Gregory fled to a castle in Tuscany because he was afraid Henry was going to march on Rome. Henry appeared at the castle barefoot, clothed in a penitential robe. Gregory made Henry stand barefoot in the snow for three days to prove Henry was genuinely repentant. Gregory reversed Henry’s excommunication, but the emperor had deceived the pope; soon thereafter Henry resumed choosing his own bishops. Gregory excommunicated Henry again, but this time the emperor marched on Rome, deposed Gregory in 1084, and selected a new pope; Gregory died in exile the following year. The debate over lay investiture wasn’t finally settled until 1123, when the First Lateran Council decided that the emperor could recommend candidates for bishop, but the final decision rested with the pope.

The Crusades

Islam began under the leadership of Muhammad in 622, espousing a radical monotheism and affirming the necessity of forcing non-Muslims to embrace Islam. By 733, Muslims had conquered the Middle East, Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Spain. Early on, Muslims were generally tolerant of Christians in their lands, though that began to change with the rise of the Turks, a people group that migrated from Central Asia into the Middle East and established a new Islamic dynasty in the 1070s. In 1095, the Byzantine emperor asked Western Christians to come to the aid of Constantinople and recapture the Holy Land.

Pope Urban II (1088–99) called for a war pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1095, arguing that it was God’s will for Christians to retake Jerusalem from the Turks. The first crusade was under the leadership of Christian knights and lasted from 1096–1099. The majority of the ranks were made up of peasants, many of whom pillaged Eastern towns and persecuted Jews along the way. In 1099, after much bloodshed, Jerusalem was captured by the crusaders, which the Christians attributed to God’s providence. Though there were certainly atrocities on both sides, neither the Christians nor the Muslims were outrageously brutal for wars of the period. Control of Jerusalem moved back and forth between Christians and Muslims over the next couple of centuries, resulting in further crusades; none were as successful as the first. In 1244, the Turks retook Jerusalem and maintained control of Palestine for 700 years. The crusades contributed to intense animosity between Christians and Muslims throughout the Middle Ages and Early Modern era.
Late Medieval Monasticism

The Cistercians began in 1098 as a reform movement within the Benedictine Order. The Cistercians were convinced that the Benedictines had become too wealthy as an order and were not sufficiently separated from the world. The Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux was the most important Catholic preacher-theologian of his lifetime. He was very outspoken, weighing in on controversies over church offices, theological debates, and the crusades. He also helped popularize the medieval idea that Mary was a co-redemptrix with Christ because of her intercessions for believers.

Dominic was a Spanish monk who became convinced that all monks should model their ministry after the example of the apostles. In 1215, he established the Order of the Preaching Brothers (the Dominicans), who emphasized itinerant preaching, voluntary poverty, and fighting heresy. The Dominicans were such fierce defenders of Catholic orthodoxy that the pope placed the order in charge of the Spanish Inquisition, a ministry intended to protect sound doctrine. The Dominicans also emphasized theological education, founding many of the most famous Catholic universities in Europe and eventually the New World.

Francis of Assisi is arguably the most popular Catholic in history. Francis came from a wealthy family before he was dramatically converted to a life of monasticism. Against the wishes of his family, he gave his clothes to a beggar, sold all his worldly possessions, and married “Lady Poverty.” Francis was committed to itinerant preaching and taking the gospel to Muslims. Francis emphasized cultivating humility and a love for the created order, besides the normal monastic emphases on poverty, chastity, and obedience. He was also a poet, writing the lyrics to the famous hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King.” The Franciscan Order was approved by the pope in 1223. Francis is perhaps most famous for allegedly receiving the stigmata in 1224 after forty days of fasting and praying.

Late Medieval Theology

During the late medieval era, the leading theological movement was scholasticism. Scholastic theologians, so-called because most of them worked in universities, were known for their interest in even the most obscure questions of theology, their commitment to rigorous logic, and a desire to make whatever distinctions were necessary to accurately explain a point. Several scholastic theologians made key contributions to the history of Christian doctrine.

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) argued for a close connection between Christ’s incarnation and his atonement. According to Anselm, the Savior had to be a God-man because only man is obligated to perfectly obey God, but only God is wholly without sin. He was challenged by Peter Abelard (1100–1160), who emphasized the subjective influence of the atonement. Anselm was most concerned with how the atonement reconciles us to God. Abelard was most concerned with how the atonement inspires us to be reconciled with our fellow man.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) developed several famous arguments for the existence of God, including the argument from design and the argument from causation. He also made major contributions to just war theory and the Judeo-Christian natural law tradition. Unfortunately, he also introduced the doctrine of transubstantiation as a way to argue that Christ was physically
present in the Eucharist. According to Thomas, when the bread and wine are consecrated, their *substance* is transformed into the body and blood of Christ, even though their *accidents* (what we can perceive with our senses) appear to still be bread and wine. Transubstantiation was adopted as official Catholic dogma in 1215.

William of Ockham (1285–1347) challenged mainstream scholasticism by arguing that simplicity was a virtue in theology and that all non-essential premises must be eliminated (“Ockham’s razor”). This eliminated some of the elaborate argumentation that other scholastic theologians had employed. Unfortunately, he also overemphasized human virtue, arguing that humans take the first step toward God in salvation and that justification is a lifelong process that is only completed at death. Neo-Augustinians such as Thomas Bradwardine (1290–1349) responded to this rampant semi-Pelagianism by championing the doctrines of grace.

Several influential doctrines were officially embraced by the Catholic Church during this period. In 1095, indulgences were introduced as a means of cancelling out the penalty due for sins. In theory, indulgences drew upon a heavenly “treasury of merits” to which the pope had access. In 1215, the seven sacraments were codified: baptism, the Eucharist, confirmation, penance, extreme unction (last rights), marriage, and ordination. When observed in faith, these sacraments “infused” (filled) the believer with saving grace, sustaining him from birth until death. In 1274, the Catholic Church officially affirmed purgatory as a place where unconfessed sin was burned off to prepare the dead Christian for heaven. Only saints were thought to go directly from earth to heaven upon death. Their excess good works comprised the treasury of merits.

**Papal Decline**

As a general rule, the papacy began a steady spiritual decline around the turn of the fourteenth century. Boniface VIII (1294–1303) epitomized the corruption that was beginning to characterize the papacy; his rule was characterized by simony, the abuse of indulgences, and nepotism. Boniface had a high view of the papacy, and in a clash with Philip IV of France, Boniface issued a famous decree arguing that every person on earth must submit to papal authority or be damned. Philip responded by forcibly removing the pope and replacing him with a new pope who was loyal to French interests. The papacy even moved to Avignon, France for over seventy years, during which time the pope was a pawn of the French court. Catholics refer to this period as the Babylonian Captivity of the Church.

Even after the papacy returned to Rome in 1377, corruption continued. For nearly forty years, there were always at least two different claimants to the papacy—three from 1409–1415! Western Europe was divided between rival popes. In 1415, the papacy was reunited through the efforts of the Council of Constance. Unfortunately, the moral decline continued. Most of the so-called Renaissance popes were guilty of nepotism and sexual immorality; a couple of prominent families controlled the papacy and at least one pope was succeeded by an illegitimate son. The popes of this period were skilled leaders and patrons of the arts: famous artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael were patronized by popes. But even Catholics agree that most of the Renaissance popes were not faithful shepherds. Grassroots discontent with the papacy would last into the Reformation period.
Eastern Orthodoxy

By 1400, Constantinople was surrounded by the Turks on all sides, physically cut off from the rest of the Christian world. A dynamic Turkish general named Mehmet II launched a six-week siege against Constantinople in 1453 before capturing the city, executing the emperor, and placing the city under Muslim control. Constantinople was renamed Istanbul and became the key Muslim city in Europe. Most Byzantine Christians migrated to the West—the latter took many Greek writings with them. The influx of Greek primary sources led to a revival of interest in Greek philosophy and the Greek-speaking church fathers among both Renaissance scholars and Catholic theologians. The Ottoman Empire would rule Eastern Europe and North Africa until the end of World War I.

The kingdom of Kievan Rus had been nominally Eastern Orthodox since the 900s. In 1240, Kievan Rus fell to the Mongols and Kiev was destroyed. The center of Russian culture began shifting to Moscow, which was a Mongol vassal state. Because the Mongols were indifferent to religious matters, the Russian Orthodox Church flourished during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; the Church was by far the best-organized institution in the Russian lands. In the 1470s, Moscow gained its independence from the Mongols under the leadership of Ivan III (“Ivan the Great”), who was a devout Orthodox believer. Ivan became the key leader of the emerging Russian kingdom that was gradually breaking away from Mongol control.

Ivan married the niece of the last Byzantine emperor and in 1510 their son Vasilli III claimed that Moscow was the “Third Rome” based on his lineal connection to the old imperial family in Constantinople. He also argued that the Patriarch of Moscow had replaced the Bishop of Rome because the latter was apostate. In 1547, Vasilli’s son Ivan IV (“Ivan the Terrible”) was proclaimed the first Russian tsar (czar), the Slavic translation of the word “Caesar.” Moscow in particular and Russia in general became the center of the Eastern Orthodox world until the Communist Revolution of 1917.

Medieval Reformers

John Wycliffe (1320–1384) was a theologian at Oxford who challenged many popular Catholic ideas. Wycliffe argued that the true church was composed only of all the redeemed of all the ages and he rejected sacramentalism, supreme papal authority, and transubstantiation. Wycliffe also argued for the supreme authority of Scripture and believed that the Bible should be available in common English. Wycliffe was never formally condemned during his lifetime, though he did lose his faculty position at Oxford. He died in exile, though in 1415 the Council of Constance posthumously declared him a heretic, exhumed his bones, and burned them. Wycliffe’s followers, called the Lollards, perpetuated Wycliffe’s views and translated most of the Bible into English.

John Huss (1372–1415) was a pastor in Prague who agreed with many of Wycliffe’s views, though he was more concerned with moral reform than theological renewal. Huss was called before the Council of Constance and promised safe conduct, but once he arrived he was imprisoned, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake in 1415. After the death of Huss, the Hussite movement continued to advocate for moral reform in Central Europe for over a century. They were also known for offering both the bread and the wine to the laity during the Eucharist.