

# History of Christian Movements and Theology



## 5. Expansion and the Beginning of the Middle Ages

### Key Dates

431	Council of Ephesus - Re-affirmation of belief in Jesus as one person
451	Council of Chalcedon - Jesus Christ is two natures (Christianity divided for the next 200 years over this matter)
461	Death of Patrick Death of Leo the Great
480	Birth of Boethius, <i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i> Birth of Benedict of Nursia
496	Conversion of Clovis, king of the Franks
521	Birth of Columba, Irish missionary to Scotland
529	Council of Orange - upheld Augustine in relation to original sin and grace
590	Birth of Gregory the Great (the first official "Pope")
560	Birth of Isidore of Seville; his "Three Book of Sentences" is the key theological work until the 12 <sup>th</sup> century
596	Augustine is sent from Rome to evangelise Britain
602	Lombards convert from Arianism to orthodoxy
622	Mohammed's flight ("hijra") from Mecca to Medina, the official birth of Islam
675	Birth of John of Damascus, an Eastern Orthodox mystic
680	Birth of Boniface, who brought the Gospel to Germany
711	Islam reaches Spain
726-787	Controversy over the worship of images (icons)
732	Battle of Tours halts the spread of Islam from Iberia into France and the rest of Europe
787	Council of Nicaea confirms the decision of John of Damascus regarding icons; ongoing controversy in the West
800	Charlemagne crowned head of the Holy Roman Empire

### Overview

During the fifth century (and beyond) Christianity continued to grow rapidly.

An earlier sentiment (from a letter written by Cyprian to Donatus in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century) continued to reflect the impact of Christianity on the known world:

"It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and good people who have learned the great secret of life. They have found a joy and wisdom which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are Christians. . . and I am one of them."

Much of the appeal of Christianity was the way it helped the poor and needy (there were no pensions or dole to support the aged or those without work or support), ministered to the sick, reached out to the suffering during epidemics (Christians became known for their work during epidemics such as plague, smallpox, measles, when thousands died and others fled for their lives; pagan religions usually offered little consolation or support), taught love, compassion, acceptance and equality before God.

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Christian preaching, belief in life after death (including as consolation for poor quality of life for now), forgiveness of sins (a powerful incentive in an age where gods normally resorted to punishment rather than forgiveness), the Fatherhood of God, inclusive family of God, eternal rewards for godly living, the return of Christ, all gave hope and security found nowhere else. The Christian community provided a strong network. Feasts and other commemorations gave structure and order for new converts.

Rodney Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity*, argues that one of the main reasons for the success of early Christianity was the Christian emphasis on caring for the sick. During the late Roman period there was a number of devastating plagues: the Antonine Plague (165-180 AD), the Plague of Cyprian (251-270 AD), and the Plague of Justinian (541-542 AD). These periods coincided with some of the most prolific growth of Christianity. Stark contends that Christian communities would have had better survival rates during plagues because of the health care they provided for one another. Christians also cared for the sick in non-Christian communities, which would increase the likelihood of their conversion, especially in times of death and uncertainty. The old pagan religions offered no explanation for why these epidemics were occurring; Christianity acted as a salvation.

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the imperial court continued to operate from Ravenna (in the East). This led to increasing debate between the Eastern rulers (the Patriarch of Constantinople adopted the title Ecumenical Patriarch, which Pope Gregory opposed) and the popes regarding where the true church was located and who was in charge.

Historians often date the ascension of Gregory as Pope (in 590) as the beginning of the Middle Ages<sup>#</sup>. Roman influence continued however. Church (canon) law was based on old Roman law. Latin became the principle language used by the church. Church hierarchy, architecture, education and literature reflected Roman styles. Gregory took the title "Vicar of Christ on Earth" (ie in His place on earth, with His authority in the Church) and "Servant of servants", titles popes continue to use to this day. Gregory promoted the concept of purgatory.

<sup>#</sup> We will not be using the popular alternative, "Dark Ages", because this would be at odds with the reality that the genuine church continued to grow, the light of the Gospel continued, mission work did not cease and humanity moved forward.

This period is marked by the Christianisation of much of Western Europe.

## Controversies

### 1. Church Hierarchy

During the first centuries of Christianity no central organisation was formed. Each group of believers was autonomous, but related to other churches. As we have already seen, this led to a concentration of ecclesiastical (from "ekklesia", or called out, meaning the church, but increasingly used to describe the formal church) power in the West in Rome. With Gregory (the "Great") the Bishop of Rome took the title Pope.

*The Papacy* - From Papa, or Father, the Pope is formally known in Roman Catholic tradition as to Bishop of Rome, the most important bishop in the Catholic world.

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## 2. Doctrine

*Purgatory* - prayer for the dead began to emerge in Christian circles in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and intensified over subsequent centuries. This practice was linked to teaching that, after physical death, (with the exception of martyrs - sound familiar?) the souls of Christians needed additional cleansing before they were ready for paradise. The Bible does not teach purgatory or prayer for the dead.

*Adoration of Mary* - The New Testament affirms the special role that Mary, the mother of Jesus, played in the incarnation, life and ministry of Jesus Christ:

“And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.” (Luke 1:46-49).

Christian acknowledges Mary as a chosen vessel of God. However, the Catholic Church has, in its own words, “clarified her position and nature through Sacred Tradition.” In 431 Mary was designated as the “Mother of God”. From 600 the church has taught that it is permissible for Christians to offer prayers to Mary. Since that time Mary has been called Queen of the Apostles, Mother of the Church, sinless (among other titles). These attributions come from some church traditions, but are at odds with what the Bible teaches.

### *Iconoclasm*

Emperor Leo III attacked the use of images. John of Damascus (676-749) defended the use of icons in worship by differentiating between veneration and worship. He argued that the use of icons is an affirmation of Christ’s humanity, because a real person can be depicted. Those who opposed the practice argued that images of Christ are not valid because they can only represent his humanity, but not his divinity. This response missed the bigger issue of the short step between an image and idolatry. In 787 the Council of Nicea supported John of Damascus, but controversy continued.



*Mary as “Theotokos”; Gregory “the Great”*

## 3. Council of Ephesus

As we have seen, the Council of Ephesus was held in 431 AD, under orders from the Roman Emperor Theodosius II. The Council sought broad confirmation of acceptance of the Nicene Creed and condemned the teachings of Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople from 428-431, in particular in relation to the role of Mary.

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Nestorius argued that Mary be titled the Christotokos, or "Birth Giver of Christ"; the majority of the Council argued for Theotokos, "Birth Giver of God". (Nestorius did not accept the concept of Jesus having both human and divine natures in one.) The sermons and teachings of Nestorius were subsequently ordered to be burned. One result of the Council was increased division between the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity (not resolved until 1994).

## 4. Council of Orange

Earlier in this course, we mentioned Augustine of Hippo and the Pelagians. Augustine, who believed in the doctrine of original sin and the need for divine intervention to bring about change, opposed Pelagius, who taught that people are born in "state of innocence", that human nature is basically good, and that people could keep God's word and requirements (without the need for grace). The Council of Orange (529AD) was an outgrowth of this controversy and emphasised both human responsibility and the role of the grace of God in bringing about salvation. The Council upheld Augustine's views.

## Nestorian Missionary Enterprises

The Assyrian Church of the East was known as a missionary movement. Early Nestorians fled persecution in the Christian Roman Empire and settled in Sassanid Persia, where they affiliated with the local Christian community and became known collectively as the Church of the East. They subsequently evangelised as far afield as China (Nestorians were in Mongolia at the time of Ghengis Khan), Siberia, Afghanistan, Japan and India. Not only did they spread the Christian gospel and plant churches but they also developed written languages for many cultures they encountered. Over subsequent centuries Nestorian communities were overtaken by Islam and Buddhism and followers were further persecuted by the Mongols, Kurds and Turks.

Today there are pockets of Nestorians in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait, Greece, Italy, Sweden, Russia, USA, Canada and Australia.

## Some Influential Christians During the Fifth to Eighth Centuries

### *Patrick, Missionary to Ireland (387-460)*

Born Maewyn Succat, a Roman, son of Christians, Patrick was kidnapped as a teenager by Irish slave traders and taken to work as a shepherd in Ireland. After meeting local Christians, he was converted to Christ. After managing to escape, he spent a period in a monastery in Europe before going back to Ireland in 432 as a missionary/bishop. Patrick travelled throughout Ireland, preaching, teaching and baptizing converts. Patrick was a committed church planter and evangelist. He established many churches, schools and monasteries. He influenced Irish kings and strove for the abolition of slavery. "Patron Saint" of Ireland since the 7<sup>th</sup> Century.

- "In the light, therefore, of our faith in the Trinity I must make this choice: regardless of the danger, I must make known the gift of God and everlasting consolation. Without fear and frankly I must spread everywhere the name of God so that after my decease I may leave a bequest to my brethren and sons whom I have baptised in the Lord - so many thousands of people."

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## *Clovis (466-511)*

Clovis was a pagan chief who united the Franks under a single monarchy. He became a Christian and the first such to rule Gaul. Clovis was baptised a catholic, which ensured Catholic ascendancy over the Arians in Gaul. He made Paris his capital and Christian centre.

## *Benedict of Nursia (480-550)*

Born into a noble Roman family, Benedict was converted to Christianity. He established a monastic order at Montecassino and (between 535 and 540) developed a “rule” to govern its operation. With Gregory’s mandate, the rule developed into the Benedictine Order. The rule, spread slowly in Italy and Gaul. It provided instructions for the government and spiritual and material well-being of monasteries by initiating the role of “Abbot” (from Greek *abba* = “father”) and integrating obedience, prayer, manual labour, and study into a disciplined daily routine. The images we have of a monastery in action reflect Benedictine models. By the time of Charlemagne the Benedictine Rule had replaced most other monastic practices in Europe.

## *Columba (521-597).*

Columba grew up in a Christian environment in Donegal, Ireland. He was instrumental in planting Christian communities in Ireland before relocating to Scotland, where he continued his evangelistic outreach to Druid Scots and Picts. Missionaries from Ireland increasingly targeted unevangelised parts of Europe, including Gaul and northern Europe.

## *Augustine*

At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century most English were pagans; by the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> they were notionally Christians (some kingdoms occasionally relapsed into paganism in the early decades). In 596 AD, 40 monks set out from Rome to evangelize the Anglo-Saxons. (England had previously been part of the Roman Empire.) Leading the group was Augustine, the prior of their monastery in Rome, whose attention had been drawn to Angle boys on sale as slaves in Rome. During his journey, Augustine heard about the ferocity of the Anglo-Saxons and returned to Rome; after being assured that their fears were groundless, the team returned to pursue the work. Their efforts commenced in the area of Kent, ruled by Ethelbert, a pagan king married to a Christian named Bertha. In 597 Ethelbert was baptized (Augustine baptism by immersion). Augustine did not always meet with success; his attempts to reconcile Anglo-Saxon Christians (who adopted Christianity through earlier mission outreach, by Celtic Christians) with the original Briton Christians (driven into western England by Anglo-Saxons) ended in failure. Conversion was a top-down process: people followed rulers. Augustine achieved success eventually. The Britons refused to give up certain Celtic customs at variance with the church. Rather than destroy pagan temples and customs, he allowed pagan rites and festivals to be retro-fitted as Christian feasts. His work produced considerable fruit over time, leading to the notional conversion of England. He has been called Augustine of Canterbury and the “Apostle of England.”

## *Isidore of Seville (560-636)*

Born in Cartagena, educated in Seville. Archbishop of Seville for 30+ years. Instrumental in bringing together opposing forces in the Visigoth conflict over Arianism. One of the most learned Christian leaders. Campaigned for conversion of the Visigothic Arians in Spain to Catholicism.

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## *Venerable Bede (673-735)*

St Bede (as he is commonly known) was born in Durham, England and grew up in the care of Benedictine monks. He is possibly the greatest of Anglo-Saxon scholars. During his life he wrote more than forty books on theology and history, especially the history of Christianity in England. He is credited with the concept of dating BC and AD.

## *Boniface (675-754)*

Boniface was born in Wessex, England. A Benedictine monk with experience in mission in Ireland, England and the region now known as the Netherlands, he brought Christianity to Germany. Boniface had a strong influence on Pepin the father of Charlemagne and was instrumental in spreading Christianity in the Frankish Empire in the 700s. He cut down an oak tree dedicated to the Germanic god Thor at Geismar and built a church out of it. Boniface was killed by band of pagan Frisians as he was reading the Scriptures to a group of new Christians on Pentecost Sunday in 754. He is known as the Apostle of Germany and is recognised as the "Patron Saint of Germany" today. Some traditions credit him with introducing the Christmas tree.

## **The Rise of Islam**

Mohammed was born in Mecca in the year 570 as a member of the Quarish tribe, which claimed descent from Abraham's son Ishmael (see Genesis 16). He worked as a trader, frequently meeting Jews and Christians (including Nestorians) on his travels and observing internecine struggles in the early church. At the age of 25 he married a wealthy 40 year-old widow named Khadija. He had numerous wives and one child, a daughter named Fatima. From the age of 40, Mohammed began to claim revelations, or "recitations" (lit. Qur'an) about God from "the Archangel Gabriel". His message called for rejection of the prevailing crude polytheism, in the face of judgment to come.



He was initially opposed by the majority of Meccans. Persecuted because of his dogmatism, Mohammed fled with his followers to the city of Medina in 622. This flight, or "hijra", marked the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Nine years later, when his forces were strong enough, he defeated Mecca, smashed most of its idols and established Islam as the official religion.

After his death in 632, the Muslim community was divided. Bitter arguments over succession led to a major split, with the majority (Sunnis) following the elected Caliphs and a smaller group (Shi'ites) supporting claims by his descendants. Islam has been divided ever since.

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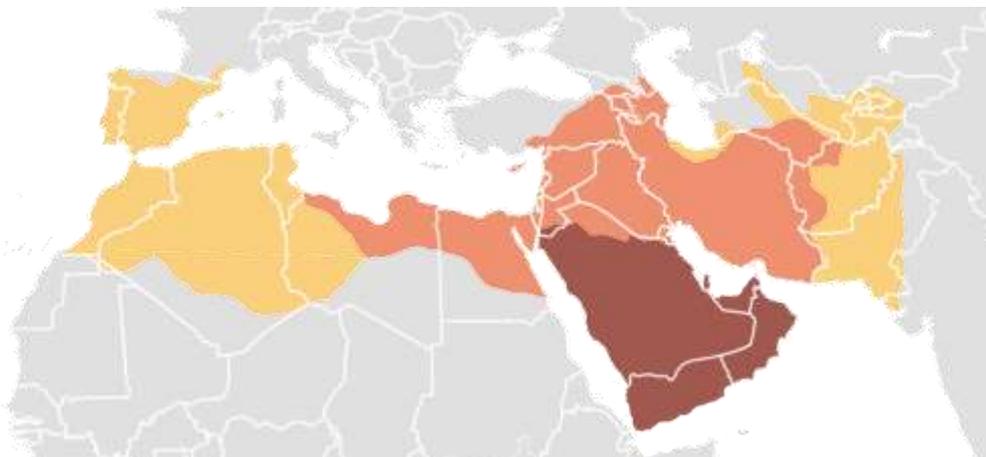
Other denominations include the Allawites (a heretical branch of Shi'ism, based mainly in Syria), Sufis (a mystical branch), Druze (followers of an Egyptian sect, in the Lebanese and Israeli mountains, Druze communities are exclusive, claim "secret" knowledge and believe in reincarnation), Wahabis (very strict; they control Saudi Arabia) and the Ahamadiya sect (Syria).

Within a hundred years of Mohammed's death, Islam spread beyond the Middle East and conquered an area larger than the Roman Empire. Dynasties shifted from Mecca to Damascus, then Baghdad. Some Christian communities in the Middle East accepted the arrival of Islam, because it freed them from Byzantine rule. Some theologians believe that elements of Jewish and Christian teaching in Islam made the new religion attractive, and enabled it to be accepted as part of God's plan.

Pressure was exerted on Christians and pagans to convert to Islam. In North Africa, following the Arab-Muslim invasion, Christians were permitted to exercise their religion, on payment of a tax and agreement not to proselytize. Around 720 additional pressure was exerted by Caliph Omar II on Christian Berbers to convert to Islam. By rapid conversion or a process of attrition, Islam succeeded in weakening the Church in North Africa, leading to its disappearance.

The Arab Muslim invasion of North Africa, which began around 643, was completed by the capture of Carthage in 698 and Ceuta in 709. In 711 Muslim armies stormed the Iberian Peninsula at Gibraltar (Jabal Tarik, named after Tarik Ibn Ziyad, the Moorish leader of the invading army) and gradually conquered almost the entire peninsula. An Umayyad Caliphate was established, based around city of Cordoba (*Qurtuba*), north of Seville. The Great Mosque of Cordoba, which started out as a Visigothic church (Saint Vincent) in 600AD was the centre of the Caliphate; it was converted back to a church in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The advance of Islam was in France in the Battle of Tours (or Battle of Poitiers in 732, when Frankish armies under Charles Martel defeated Emir Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi Abd al Rahman near the city of Tours. Muslim forces occupied Spain until 1492, when the last stronghold, Granada, fell to the Catholic Kings Ferdinand and Isabella. Many Muslims today continue to lament the loss of Spain to global Islam.



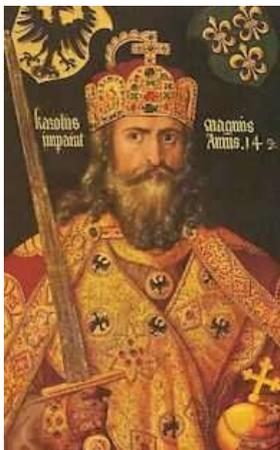
Expansion under Mohammad, 622-632  
Expansion during the Patriarchal Caliphate, 632-661  
Expansion during the Umayyad Caliphate, 661-750

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## Beginning and Consolidation of the Holy Roman Empire

We now enter the first stages of a new era in church and theological history, the so-called Middle Ages. Between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries waves of conquering tribes rise and fell. The Vandals, Huns, Visigoths, Burgundians and others were gradually subsumed. Politically, much of Europe increasingly was incorporated in a political construct that came to be known as the Holy Roman Empire (in an attempt to restore some of the glory of the old Roman Empire, but with Christian branding). The Papacy and Frankish rulers increasingly worked together and provided military assurances for Rome, which was vulnerable to attack from the Lombards. On Christmas Day 800 in St Peter's, Rome, Charlemagne (Charles the Great or Charles I, King of the Franks from 768), who finally defeated the Lombards, was crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in Rome. Charlemagne imposed the Benedictine Rule in monasteries all over Europe.

Christianity now dominated politics, culture and life in Europe. Cities were dominated by cathedral churches. A Christian art emerged (using old figures and techniques, but with new messages). Christian poets continued the classical tradition, but were now centred on the Gospel. Celibate men were accorded increasing power. Martyrs and saints became the new super-heroes. A new morality pervaded society; secular law reflected Christianity. The church was triumphant and dominant as late antiquity finished and a new age began.



Charlemagne and Empire

## Issues Facing Christians During this period

- power was increasingly centred in Rome, shared later with the Holy Roman Emperor, but also balanced with centrist thinking in the eastern part of the empire
- Christianity shaped political thinking, but the reverse also applied
- the Christian community was becoming increasingly diversified
- Christian community was becoming more about external power structures than the kind of relationship with God and one another that the New Testament and the Gospel teach; more about cultural, linguistic and economic identity than discipleship, the inner life, fellowship of believers
- those who sought discipleship did so in increasing isolation, eg as hermits, monks, mystics
- tradition (and current thinking and interpretation) had equal weight to the Scriptures; theology was subsumed and made subservient to social interests and priorities
- Islamic expansion in the margins increasingly posed a threat that would ultimately lead to clashes of tectonic proportions, the results of which are still being felt today.