

PURIST HERESIES

Why Constantine embraced Christianity is not known, but it is believed he liked the order and authority and unity (which was soon to end as we discussed on Arius). Whatever the reason, the Church was, after 312, a respectable body within society.

This inevitably increased the amount of worldliness in the church and the number of purely nominal Christians within the church.

Many felt that life had become too easy and they were not following their true Christian path of sacrifice. There were no more martyrs, or the possibility of such. Thus many chose to take on the white robe of virginity since the red robe of martyrdom was no longer an option.

This produced the monastic movement. Anthony, an egyptian monk (254-356) began the movement of hermits in the desert. Paccomius, a younger contemporary (286-346) began the community ideal of the monastic movement.

The "flight to the desert" spread both east and west. The gnostic and Manichaeian doctrine of Pure Spirit escaping hostile matter was an unconscious influence in 4th century asceticism. This was the "higher" way and most only followed at a distance. In the fourth century, the persecuted church became the persecuter. Force was used if nothing else sufficed.

THE DONATIST HERESY

First, a word about Augustine of Hippo. After the apostle Paul, he influenced the development of Christianity more than anyone else for centuries. He is referred to in Hippo, a town where he served as bishop.

For our purposes, his importance lies in his concern and fight with two major heresies within the church. The first, the Donatists, were in every regard a purist movement. The second, the fight with the heretic Pelagius, is not truly a purest movement, but because of its importance I will deal with it.

When Augustine became bishop of Hippo, he was in the middle of a long standing battle between the Catholic church and the Donatists. The Donatists party originated among strict believers in the early 300's who denounced other Christians for backsliding during Imperial persecutions.

The Donatists began with a presbyter of the Roman Church, one Novatian. In the persecutions of Decius, in 250, many Christians had apostasised and, when peace was restored, sought re-admission to the church.

Novatian maintained that those who had lapsed could not dispense the Sacraments. The Bishop of Rome disagreed and advocated leniency. Novatian set himself up as rival Bishop of Rome and became head of a heretical movement, allying himself with the Montanists.

By the time Augustine was consecrated as Bishop, the Donatists outnumbered Catholics in the city. From their perspective, Augustine was the heretic, and theirs was the pure, uncontaminated faith. By this time, the dispute had become a self-renewing feud, complete with church burnings, beatings and occasionally worse.

In 411, Augustine tried to resolve the differences, he failed. Previously he had insisted force should not be used to compel heretics to return to the church. He changed his mind as unity was of overriding importance and had to be maintained or the church could not function.

They were thus persecuted and coerced but they lingered on and finally disappeared with the Saracen invasions of North Africa in the seventh century.

ISSUES INVOLVED - there were two issues. One issue was the meaning of sacraments. Crucial to the Donatist position was the belief that sacraments administered by the unworthy were invalid.

Augustine argued that if the RECEIVER had faith, he or she would receive a valid Sacrament. The church was the custodian, God was the giver, not man. That this was clearly shown to be the church's view prevented dangers of subjectivity and subjective judgement.

The other question was the meaning of the Church itself. In a sense, Donatism was a schism, not a heresy. They kept to orthodox teaching but separated themselves from it.

Their attitude emphasised the old point of conflict: was the church for the perfect, or was it a Church for all levels of humans? Should only good people be recognised as members of a divine society?

Augustine argued that its true that only saints compose the TRUE church but the visible church is not the "elect". The elect who are the Church, cannot be the subject of human judgement. People must accept the Church on earth, God alone can judge the elect.

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PELAGIUS was born in Either Irland or Celtic Briton around 360. He came to Rome in 400. the controversy pelagius opened was whether or not Free Will existed in humans, and how much ones choice of action was his own or was predetermined.

In other words, the whole relationship between Sin and Grace.

Pelagius considered himself a teacher, which he said was a vocation open to all. He saw no moral difference between a cleric and a lay vocation. This at a time clerics had come to see themselves as superior. Pelagius argued that moral responsibility belonged to all Christians.

When he arrived in Rome he was horrified at the low morality he found there. People made excuses on the ground of human weakness and depravity. He wanted to show that humans were not powerless.

"If I ought, then I can" was the motto he used. God's grace was there to help all to salvation, but humans must make themselves worthy of it by striving.

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In 5th century Christian circles theoretical doctrine was being given more importance than practical Christian ethics. Pelagius was determined to remedy this.

He was condemned at the Council of Carthage in 416, for denying original sin, the need for infant baptism, and even the efficacy of the incarnation and death of Christ.

He died, ignored and forgotten ~~and~~ in 431, at the Council of Ephesus, Pelagianism (together with Nestorianism) were condemned as a heresy.

Augustine and Pelagius had great respect for each other but differed in temperament and experience. Augustine spoke from his own experience (he was a mystic) while Pelagius conceived of Christianity as moral striving.

Augustine maintained that Pelagius had put salvation outside of Christ and his church. that for Pelagius, Christ was merely an example, not a Saviour, so that man was not dependent on Christ's grace.

Augustine held that humans could do nothing w/o prior grace, which enabled humans to turn to God and to believe in Christ, otherwise there would be no hope. His main contention was that if human nature could achieve eternal life unaided, faith in Christ was needless.

SEMI-PELAGIANISM was the idea that God's grace and man's free will work together. Anti-Augustinianism grew over the

issue of predestination. This aroused opposition, particularly in the monasteries, as it seemed to nullify all personal striving for self-denial and virtue.

The orthodox attacked these ideas saying it still gave humans and not God the credit for ones own salvation. Finally, in 529, both Pelagianism and Semi-pelagianism were condemned.

The OFFICIAL DOCTRINE of "orthodox" Christianity now stated that humans inherit a nature so corrupt that one has no power to turn to God unless Divine Grace comes to him 1st

The irony is that most present day Christians are more semi-pelagian than Augustinian. But the outcome of the Pelagian controversy was important because it contributed to the stabilising of Christian doctrine. It did not solve the problem of free will and predestination.

The central theme of Christianity was formally established: The second person of the Trinity became incarnate as a man in order to achieve Atonement and to bring divine grace, which is not merited, but w/o which persons can do nothing.

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THE WALDENSIANS

Unlike many medieval attempts to return to a "purer" form of Christianity, the Waldensian movement, anticipating the Franciscan by a generation, was started by a layman, not a priest or monk.

Peter Waldo did not envision a monastic order as did Francis of Assisi. Instead he sought to lead other laypeople to the Gospels, which were then available only in Latin or Greek.

Peter was born in Lyon, France sometime in the mid-12th century. He became a wealthy merchant in the Rhone Valley but in 1170 he heard the story of Alexis, who, on his wedding night made a pact with his bride to remain "in virgin purity". The next day he stole away, going to his own home in disguise. His parents didn't recognize him but in the name of their "lost" (presumed dead) son, they let him in allowing him to sleep in the stable. He was treated poorly by the servants and accepted it all as mortification. Seventeen years later, dying, he wrote his name on a paper clutched in his dying hand.

This story is said to have brought about a spiritual crisis and he became convinced that his prosperity had been gained at the expense of his soul, especially loaning money at interest.

Because he could not read Latin, Waldo paid two priests to translate parts of the New Testament into the French of his day. He read and re-read them and decided that his prosperous life was not compatible with Christianity.

He gave away his money and declared he would become a wandering preacher following the apostolic life, ie, the wandering life of Jesus and his disciples.

His wife, not ready to take so radical a step, complained to the archbishop of Lyon, who forbade Waldo to preach w/o authorization.

Waldo would not be swayed. He offered his real estate and other property to his wife, rather than selling them and giving them to the poor, and abandoned home and family.

He gathered followers--people impressed by his simple vernacular presentation of the Gospels and his own personal commitment to the "apostolic life."

The people who followed him were mainly poor, hence the name "The Poor Men of Lyons". He did not, however, turn his preaching into a call to rebellion against the rich and powerful but sent his followers out two by two, as Jesus had done, with instructions to preach and to beg for food and shelter.

After being rebuffed by the Archbishop, Peter appealed to Pope Alexander III for authorization to preach. Unlike Francis who, in 1206, received the permission for his lifestyle and preaching from Pope Innocent III, Waldo was turned down, tho the Pope approved of his voluntary poverty.

Waldo himself visited Rome in 1179 during a major church council, seeking recognition and approval of their mission and of their translated scriptures.

A commission was appointed but its members, church intellectuals, considered the Waldensians to be simple people, unfit to expound Christian doctrine.

Turned down, he thought of Peter's words in Acts 5, "We must obey God rather than men." He kept on preaching and his followers spread thruout southern France, northern Italy and countries beyond. If threatened, they disguised themselves as wandering craftsmen.

They began to teach what the Donatists had, that no sinful priest could celebrate the Eucharist or, variously, that any believer could consecrate the bread and wine as well as pronounce the absolution of sins.

Waldo's defiance caused him to be summoned in 1180 to a church synod in Lyons. He affirmed his faith but said he would go right on preaching with or without approval.

They criss-crossed Europe, getting as far as the present day Czech Republic. Because they defied the ban on their preaching, Pope Lucius III condemned them. In the 1180s the Waldensians were excommunicated.

They were persecuted and those who survived withdrew into the isolated valleys of SW France and N. Italy. a split developed, the Italians settling in towns, the French still maintaining a wandering lifestyle . After the Reformation, they formed a small "reformed" church of which a remnant continues to survive in northern Italy. They are the only medieval heretical movement that has survived to the present day.

THE LOLLARDS

John Wycliffe was one of the greatest of leaders in the rebellion against the power of the priests. He stirred up the revolt against ecclesiastical ideas of rule, supplied the necessary weapons, and initiated a movement which was to continue up to the Reformation.

Born in 1324, he early showed great intellectual promise. He began his career when Pope Urban renewed his demand for feudal dues from King Edward III, but English pride felt this as an affront to the country's independence.

Wycliff spoke out against the church and the crown recognized his abilities so he enjoyed royal protection. When the church called him before the bishop of London. The two sides hurled insults at each other and Wycliff never said a word.

He refused to be silenced and wrote prolifically and his writings had great influence. His indignation had been first aroused by the curia's demand for money, but now it became clear to him that the Church had long been unfaithful to its true mission.

Since Constantine, the church had become more and more secular and the clergy was to blame. Thus, like most medieval heretics, Wycliffe concluded that the Church had long since been decadent.

In attacking the priesthood's claim to power, he struck directly at the papacy, going by degrees to outright

hostility, he decided the church could exist w/o the Pope because its head is Christ.

By right, the church should have only deacons and priests for its officialdom. The Heirarchal ladder was an aping of secular arrangements for which there was no justification. The Pope ought to be an imitator of Christ in moral virtue, not a ruler striving for absolute power.

Wycliff had a shocking insight when he decided that the papacy was the very citidal of the antichristianity. The implications were terrifying. For him, the institution of the papacy itself had become a manifestation of the Antichrist. No more heretical position is conceivable.

From here he asked, What gives the priesthood its unassailable prestige in the eyes of the People, however corrupt it may be? The answer he came to was that the strongest prop to the power of the priesthood was the doctrine of TRANSUBSTANTIATION.

His repudiation of this doctrine was directly connected to his anti-clerical struggle. Since the Mass was founded upon this doctrine, in setting out to shatter that doctrine he struck at the very heart of Catholic worship.

Transubstantiation was an idea which had been trumped up in order to increase the prestige of the clergy. Sacramentlism gave the priest a supernatural radiance by pretending he was able to transform bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

He saw the mendicant orders (the Franciscans and Dominicans) as the 2nd institution with which the papacy bolstered its claim. They were the fighting troops sent in wherever the Pope wanted to press his claims. He felt Francis had been betrayed by his own order.

His positive program envisioned a type of priest poor in worldly goods and dedicated to the task of serving ones fellow men. He seems not to have been aware of Peter Waldo, but he put his ideal into practice giving the name "evangelical men" They became wandering preachers and teachers, dressed in course cloth with a staff in there hand to signify poverty and humility. The name LOLLARDS was a derogatory one meaning "mumbler" refering to their prayers.

He instructed the Lollards to make the law of Christ accessible to all, believing the church had suppressed it. He began to work on a translation of the Bible for he had conceived the bold idea of making the scriptures the common property of all believers--a genuinely reformational project

He believed in the priesthood of all believers which he found in the Bible, and was destined to put an end to the power hungary clergy. The church could not harm him tho he was forced to quit teaching at Oxford. He died of a stroke in 1384 while hearing mass in his own church.

15 years later the church and state in England united to exterminate the Lollards. In 1415, his ordered his bones exhumed and scattered away from a consecrated burial ground. His ideas continued influencing Henry VIII, & the puitans.

JAN HUS and the HUSSITES

Hus was born in Bohemia in 1369 and was a very devout person, but in his studies he felt it necessary to keep an open mind toward what he learned. He became pastor of Bethlehem church in Prague. He rose rapidly in the church hierarchy but his sermons were passionate diatribes against both immoral clergy and laity.

Recent research has shown that he borrowed extensively from John Wycliffe, but didn't always agree with him. He agreed on opposing the dominion of the clerics, but did not go along with him in the repudiation of transubstantiation.

He made enemies among the clergy of Prague, but the people revered him. His enemies succeeded in persuading the archbishop to excommunicate him but Hus paid no attention. He continued to preach to tremendous crowds.

He was more daring, saying from the pulpit, "Our Popes and successors of Peter have turned themselves into hangmen and executioners; they call faithful Christians heretics and burn them."

When he began criticizing the rulers of the state as well. Thus in 1412 on orders from the king, he left Prague and went into exile. In Constance, where he went to defend his ideas, before the council held there from 1414 -18, the drama reached its peak.

The council was supposedly convened to bring reform to the church. But the council itself was too caught up in the

decadence of the time. It turned into a social event. There were some serious and famous theologians present but in such an atmosphere, nothing could be done.

Not one of the theologians supported Hus. He was the single individual pitted against the great assemblage. The contrast was so glaring so the college of Cardinals ordered him arrested.

He was condemned, stripped of his priesthood, and turned over to the secular arm to be burned as a heretic. He was given the chance to recant, but would not. For he said he had never taught nor preached what false witnesses had testified against him. "What I said and wrote was always for the truth."

The moment the pile of wood was lit, he began singing a hymn until he was overcome by the flames. His ashes were thrown into the Rhine.

Out of his defeat there emerged an invincible force which proved to be a grave menace to the church. The greater part of the populace of Bohemia were fervently attached to Hus as to a prophet, and after his death he was venerated as a saint and martyr."

The Czech people were aroused and rebellion against the power of the priests burst forth. The Hussite movement became a raging torrent. The cause of Hus was inseparable from the intellectual development of the Czech people. They have always felt Hus represented the very essence of the nation's spirit.

THE BEGUINES AND BEGHARDS

The beguines were made up of unmarried women who followed a religious life w/o formally becoming a nun. Some were approved by the church, others considered heretics and the distinction was a vague one.

The movement began in the 12th century by women who wanted to live the apostolic life of a wandering poor preacher supported by the charity of ones hearers. The male end of this movement was the beghards.

Very often these two groups lived under the Franciscan rule of the third order, written for lay people and often had Franciscan spiritual directors.

This was a refuge for both young girls and widows who controlled property or aristocratic women who wanted to extricate themselves from tangles of inheritance or from marriage with men who wanted to control them and their estates.--Eleanor of Aquitaine, King Henry II widow, retired to a convent.

Unlike nuns, women could support themselves and didn't have to bring a dowry. It provided an environment for reading and study otherwise unavailable. This brought criticism, especially from the severe Dominicans because of religious books in their own language.

From what is today Belgium the beguine movement spread into France, Germany and other countries. Many saw the beguines as pious women whose holy lives were a reproach to the established church.

Some lived cloistered lives, but some vagabond beguines irritated the ecclesiastical authorities. Some became companions and counselors to the nobility. At times their advice was based on visions and professed psychic abilities.

The church disapproved as spiritual authority based on personal visions was bound to come in conflict with papal authority.

opposition from secular society came because the women were perceived as unfeminine. They were accused of being pious hypocrites, women who did not know their place and occasionally, lesbians. By the 1400's, the earliest protestant reformers would sometimes include beguines along with the Catholic clergy in their condemnations.

Increased persecution of both beguines and beghards was tied to a popular disenchantment with the Franciscan friars who had lost their purity and zeal. Increasingly insecure, the Franciscans themselves often turned on them, their unofficial imitators.

In the early 14th century the church hierarchy's hatred for the beguines mounted. a council in 1311 - 12 produced a decree condemning women "commonly known as beguines" who wore nunlike clothing but took no vow of obedience and did not give up private property.

According to the council, they taught erroneous doctrines about the Trinity and sacraments. The decree forbade women to live as beguines. Earlier church councils

had also legislated against the beguines and beghards for preaching to the people with authority and "leading simple souls into error."

About this time church authorities began to excommunicate beguines and in some cases try them for heresy. Some were executed, being burned at the stake.

John XXII pope from 1316 - 1334 persecuted both beguines and the more radical Franciscans (known as spirituals), who continued to advocate holy poverty even as other clergy and monastic orders grew richer. He also abolished many of their houses, tho some survived.

As the 14th century moved toward the black death, beguine communities were more frequently condemned. Yet it persisted thru the Reformation and some groups lasted into the 20th century as communities of women in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, who did charitable work amoun the poor.

But the accusations against the beguines and beghards were not made because they preached heretical doctrines rather, the basic accusation was one of having too much pious zeal outside "the system." The fear was that their personal piety would cause people to treat them as religious authorities equal to and in competition with orthodox priests and monks. In the case of the beguines, the fact they were women heightened the danger since they were "the gate of the devil" according to Jerome and the church.

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FREE SPIRIT MOVEMENT

This was applied to the most radical beguines and beghards, who rejected ecclesiastical goverence and claimed to perceive God everywhere (pantheism). They claimed to have united their individual wills with God's and were free to do whatever they pleased.

Scholars have traced one key Free Spirit idea, the soul's oneness with God, to a renewed spread of neoplatonic ideas in Western Europe during the 13th century.

neoplatonism saw the world emanating or proceeding from God in a series of stages from the spiritual to the physical. Humans by identifying with their spiritual parts could become more atuned to the divine and ultimately reabsorbed by it. This, of course, is a restement of gnostic ideas and from the churches point of view, denied the importance of Christ's incarnation.

They were criticized for making this the basis of a libertine lifestyle, for indulging themselves however they wanted and denying they had sinned. They believed they had no need of priests, but could listen to the Sprit themselves. They didn't need to confess their sins or keep other rules like fasting. and their children were free from original sin.

These statements have been echoed many times in centuries since, for example, in the proclamations of Moses David Berg. leader of the CHILDREN OF GOD sect in the 1960's and 1970's.

FRATICELLI (spiritual Franciscans)

The fraticelli, which means little brothers in Italian, were radical members of the Franciscan order. They split from it in disgust in the 13th and 14th centuries. These "irregulars" were most numerous in Italy and Sicily.

In 1318, John XXII issued a bull accusing them of saying there were two churches: the "carnal" Roman Catholic church and the "spiritual" church consisting of them and their followers.--one decadent and one following the way of the apostles.

Along with condemning them for their attacks on the clergy, he accused them of spreading unfounded prophecies about the coming end of the world, based on the apocalyptic writings of Joachim of Fiore and his interpreters.

One monk, Angelo del Clareno, established several communities of Fraticelli in parts of Italy where they were supported by local rulers.

Another group known as MICHAELISTS for their leader, Michael of Cesena, eventually found refuge in Naples. He carried on a "battle of tracts" with the Catholic hierarchy and was ultimately excommunicated in 1328 for his attacks on papal authority.

The Fratricelli faded from view the following century, but their ideals were in a sense continued by other radical church reformers such as the Lollards and the Franciscan order itself.

LEO ~~TOLSTOY~~ ~~TOLSTOY~~ (1828-1910)

The Eastern Orthodox church has produced very few heretics mainly because it has retained the Johanine (mystical) Christianity and has not been concerned with Earthly power as the western church has.

However, in Russia the church was oriented so entirely toward the hereafter that it concerned itself very little with the Earthly concerns of its faithful. It was totally indifferent to the social distress of the people.

Tolstoy had a religious crises when confronted with life's inexorable movement toward death. In his Diary of a Madman he talks about the crises and depression that enveloped him.

After seeking help in science w/o success, he turned to the peasant people of Russia and became and remained for the rest of his life deeply moved by their social condition.

As a youth, Tolstoy had left the church but later he realized the choice was to perish in the desert of nullity or to turn back to the church. When he did, he became aware of certain ethical questions. He was troubled by the church's attitude towards dissenters, and the fact they condoned the death penalty.

He found himself unable to accept the doctrine of transubstantiation and the dogma of the Trinity and it seemed to him since the third Century, the church had cherished lies and cruelty. Theology had completely obscured Christian truth.

Thus Tolstoy became a heretic and the greatest religious rebel that the Eastern Church has produced in modern times. With Russian intemperance, he blasted the whole orthodox doctrine and effectively paved the way for the Bolshevist destruction of the church.

He did not take the position that religion was a mistaken course. In the "Diary" he says these spells of madness brought him wonderful illuminations. He realized death was not to be feared. his writing the "illuminations" were much more dangerous a threat to the orthodox church than is critique of dogma. He showed the waves of that Christian spirit which the NT designates as folly in Christ.

He focused his full attention upon the Gospels, which he read again and again, his enthusiasm growing each time. Thru his constant reading of the Gospels he grew ever more confirmed in his love of Christ.

After intensive study, he decided the Sermon on the Mount was the most important. Tolstoy was the great discoveror of the Sermon on the Mount in our day and age.

He decided that the nucleus of the entire sermon was the words: "Do not resist evil." This, in his view, was the "key to the whole" and expressed the core of Christianity. Gandhi became Tolstoy's greatest disciple.

Non resistance to evil has nothing to do with tacit acceptance of the phenomena of evil. He could see what was going to happen in Russia and wrote against the evil he saw

He did succeed in making the world look up and listen and the Tolstoy residence became a place of pilgrimage for people from all over the World.

Tolstoy's preaching of non-violence and his stirring protests shook governments to their foundations. The Tsarist state feared the seditious force of Tolstoy's conception of Christianity and the police often descended upon the house of the great writer and searched it.

What Tolstoy was after was a "total overturning" and annihilation of the existing order. The sharpest reply to him came, as was only logical, from the Orthodox church.

For a long time the church had kept silence maybe because of Tolstoy's noble rank and fame as a writer. But when it became convinced that his attitude was unalterable, the Church pronounced excommunication upon the 70 year old writer.

Tolstoy was not upset by this and it in no way altered his life. He had long since ceased attending church and did not want any priests for his burial. His basic premise was that a religion which lends itself to defend existing wrongs sacrifices much of its truthfulness.

He insisted that the Christian is obligated to follow the Sermon on the mount. In his last great novel Resurrection he attempted to show the consequences for peoples personal lives of the effort to put the Sermon into practice. It is said that he burned with the fire of primitive Christianity, and this upset many contemporaries.

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