

CHRISTIANITY

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THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

Christianity is the religion which springs historically from Jesus of Nazareth. The first followers of Jesus believed that He traveled about Palestine as a preacher and teacher; that He healed and worked wonders; that He ran afoul of the conservative religious and political forces in that land, was crucified and rose from the dead. They declared that, in a resurrected and glorified form, He appeared to many of them. They must have believed it, for within 40 days after Jesus had been executed, what had been a despairing and disintegrating band of disillusioned dreamers was transformed into a company of zealots to dare any fate to proclaim that this resurrected Jesus was in fact God's promised Messiah, or in Greek, the Christ. The Christian religion is founded on their belief that their Master rose from the dead.

Of the 12 specially chosen Disciples - the one who stands out is Simon, better known as Peter. A name derived from the Greek, meaning "Rock". Jesus is reported to pun on the name and its meaning: "Thou art Peter, and upon this Rock will I build my church."

The other apostles, as this band of Jesus' intimates came to be known, are shadowy figures. But Peter, headstrong, blundering, violently temperamental, easily influenced by his surroundings, or by the words of others, yet always ardent and - after one terrible experience while Jesus was on trial - always courageous, Peter is unforgettable. It was Peter to whom the Gospels accord the honor of first openly saluting Jesus as the Messiah. In his subsequent career he preached and taught in many places, finally reaching in some unknown fashion, Rome, where he is generally believed to have suffered martyrdom under Nero about 65 A. D.

Besides Peter the outstanding figure in Christanity's formative first century was the man who has been credited with having written most of the Epistles which form such an important part of the New Testament.

A Pharisaic Jew born in Tarsus, Saul - as he was known before his conversion - went to Jerusalem as a youth to complete his Talmudic education. Soon he was going all out to suppress the new teaching, even having a part in the stoning of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Then suddenly, in 35 A.D., as he was riding to Damascus bent on destroying a company of Christians there, he underwent the shattering experience so vividly described in Acts. From there, having adopted the name Paul (meaning "Little"), he went on to become the great missionary to the Gentiles. Tradition says he was finally beheaded in Rome about 65 A.D.

Peter's teaching was rudimentary: Jesus was the Messiah, sent by God, rejected by His nation but certified by His resurrection, who was soon to return to lift into a glorious and eternal state of bliss all who acknowledged Him as Lord and were baptized in His name. The tremendous questions regarding the nature of Christ and His relation to God and to humanity, which were to rend later generations and still torment men's minds, seemed scarcely to have occurred to Peter.

Paul was of a different stripe. He was no Galilean fisherman being carried to immortality by the intensity of his devotion to a master with whom he had lived on terms of personal intimacy. Paul was a sophisticated Roman citizen and a product of the Greek-Hebrew culture. He was an indefatigable founder of churches, and in these churches he had to deal with all sorts of competing interpretations of what Christian teaching was. So he wrote letter after letter to straighten out the thinking - and at times behavior - in these

churches. Paul is the true author of what we know today as Christianity. Differences and divisions among Christians have resulted from the obscuring of the simple moral precepts of the Galilean by the sophisticated metaphysical speculations of this man from Tarsus.

Paul, writing 20 to 30 years later, tried to give a satisfying interpretation of these teachings to the Gentile converts in his churches. When Paul tried to answer those inescapable questions - inescapable if Christianity was to survive - the theology which was to take hard-and-fast form in the later creeds was born.

For 250 years after the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul the Christian church spread steadily over the Mediterranean world. During the same period there gradually emerged a formulation of Christian teachings and of ways in which congregations should be governed.

The second and third centuries witnessed an accelerating decline of the Roman Empire. But Diocletian who became Emperor in 284 brought the most terrible of all persecutions to the Christians. For two ghastly years he did his best to drown Christianity in blood.

In 305 Diocletian abdicated. A struggle for the imperial power began at once. But it was speedily decided in favor of Constantine.

Constantine was not an avowed Christian but he required some strong cultural cement to hold together his sprawling, multicultured empire, and he believed that he could find that binding element in Christianity. He extended complete toleration to Christians. (Edict of Milan, 313). As Emperor in his new capital of Constantinople he became the great patron of the church.

But Constantine must have begun to wonder. From all quarters came reports of the bitterness with which Christians were disputing over theological

issues, excommunicating and denouncing each other. These disputes came to a focus in Alexandria. The issue was whether Christ was of the same substance as God the Father, or of like substance, because the two Greek words involved, "Homocousian" and "Homoiousian" were so similar.

This battle raged and spread until finally the Emperor, determined to have internal peace, summoned all Christian bishops to a council at Nicaea in 325. Constantine himself presided and out of an assembly which had more of the characteristics of a political convention than a religious convocation there came finally that Nicene Creed which declares that Christ was of the same substance as God and which remains a standard of orthodoxy for Roman, Eastern, Anglican, and some other churches.

From Constantine on, the Christian record undergoes a fundamental change. Many will contend that it was not a change for the better.

The Eastern church instinctively sought to protect its spirituality by withdrawal from worldly contacts. The deserts near Antioch and in Egypt filled with hundreds of anchorites who, despairing of the fate of society and living alone in caves, huts or in small companies, followed extremely ascetic practices for the subjugation of the flesh and the cultivation of poverty. From the solitary hermits, this movement toward asceticism developed into the establishment of monasteries. One of the notable champions of early monasticism was St. Jerome, the scholar who translated both Old and New Testaments from their Hebrew and Greek originals into Latin. His translation, the Vulgate, is the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church of this day.

THE COMING OF PAPACY

These were the decades during which the grip of the emperors, far away in Constantinople, was loosening on their Italian, North African and Western European possessions. The bishops of Rome began to exercise civil as well as ecclesiastical authority - often because there was no one else to do so - and

found their position developing steadily toward that eminence which was presently to be accorded the Papacy.

There were some great church names in that period. Possibly the greatest was St. Augustine. As a young man he had lived a sensual life and had a son by a concubine with whom he lived for years. Then he reached a psychological crisis: walking in his garden he seemed to hear a voice, "Take and Read!" He picked up the copy of the Epistles which lay at hand and his eyes fell on Romans 13:13,14. "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof." At that moment St. Augustine found his spiritual haven.

Augustine's mark can be seen on every later theologian, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic. Two of his books are among the world's classics. He died in 430.

For a thousand years after Rome's fall, Europe was one vast welter of fighting. Emperors in Constantinople from time to time tried to assert their shadowy claim to monarchy over the West, but by Christmas Day 800, the Bishop of Rome crowned in St. Peter's the German Chieftain Charlemagne who had conquered Germany, France, Northern Spain and most of Italy, bestowing on him the title of Roman Emperor.

Yet while the massive political institution which had been history's longest-lived empire was falling into chaos, the Christian church was steadily widening its boundaries. Many in the tribes of Goths and Huns who captured Rome and broke up the western empire were baptized Christians. To be sure, most of them were Arian Christians and therefore considered heretics by the Roman Church because they still held the beliefs that had been rejected by the Nicene

Council. They were converts of the great missionary Ulfilas or of his successors. Ulfilas, who went from Constantinople to preach among the Visigoths, illustrates how Christianity helped keep learning alive through what are called the Dark Ages, for he reduced the Gothic languages to writing and translated the Bible into them. (He would not, however, translate the Old Testament books of Kings, saying that the tribesmen already knew too much about fighting.) No miracle in the Bible begins to equal in incredibility the miracle that Europe's warlike tribes should have chosen Jesus of Nazareth for their God.

While the territorial extension of Christianity thus continued, the institutional authority of the western church came steadily to center in the Bishops of Rome. By the middle of the fifth century, the Bishops of Rome were asserting that, as successors of St. Peter in that office, they outranked the other patriarchs. That claim began the schism between the Western and Eastern churches. Later, popes struggled with local monarchs over the question whether kings were vassals of the heads of the church.

This contest reached its most dramatic climax when Pope Gregory VII forced Henry IV, the German ruler, to stand for three successive days in the snow, barefoot and in penitent's garb, at the Castle of Canossa in Tuscany while he besought the Pope to lift his excommunication. Henry later captured Rome and Gregory VII died in exile. But history has never forgotten that picture of the barefoot king in the courtyard.

By the end of the 12th century, Pope Innocent III dictated the imperial succession in Germany, forced a French king to take back a wife he had divorced, made a king in Spain give up his wife, a king of Aragon acknowledge his vassalage, and by interdict and excommunication forced King John of England to sue for absolution, hand over his kingdom as a fief of the Papacy and agree to pay an annual

fee to the Pope as recognition of his ultimate power over the Plantagenet Kingdom.

The issue on which Gergory VII and Innocent III carried the Papacy to its greatest secular power continues to this day and crops up in many forms. It is the issue of the church and state relations. Specific issues change with the centuries, but every branch of Christianity has, at one time or another, been troubled by that issue. The attempts made by Popes and Protestant reformers to settle it by appeal to the words attributed to Christ, "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things which be God's," have settled nothing, for this leaves unanswered who is to say what is Caesar's and what God's. In actuality the relations of church and state are being fixed in our time, whether in the United States, the Argentine or the Soviet Union on a basis of pragmatic workability.

While the medieval church in the West was building up its power, that in the East was passing through a sad period. Yet this church also had its missionaries, who converted the Bulgarians, the Moravians in what today is Hungary and finally the Russians. When Peter the Great ascended the throne, one of his first moves to "modernize" Russia was to place the church under control of the Czar. So it remained until the Communist revolution of 1917. Today it lives, no longer "established" but not actively suppressed, under a communistic government officially atheist, to which it renders as obsequious political obedience as in former days it did to the Romanov Czars.

Early in the Seventh Century there came out of Arabia another religion, Islam. This passionately monotheistic religion which numbers Jesus among the true prophets but exalts its founder Mohammed as the greatest of all Allah's interpreters to man, quickly spread as far as Spain, capturing the Christian

shrines in Palestine. For some 200 years Christian Crusaders fought bloodily and sometimes successfully to win back the Holy places. By the end of the 13th century, the crusading impulse in Western Europe was exhausted.

The medieval period was an age when the authority of the Church was accepted almost without question. The claims of the Papacy to a universal sovereignty, though rejected in the East, were seldom denied in theory in the West and came nearer to realization in practise than ever before or since.

That was also the age which could produce world-renouncing piety that reached its highest attainment in St. Francis of Assisi. In his figure, medieval Europe saw the embodiment of its religious ideals. His was a life of wealth voluntarily renounced, of ascetic poverty carried to the furthest possible extreme, of humble identification with the poor, the loathsomely afflicted, of consecration to the service and discipline of the church, of founding a large monastic order, of readiness to court death in missionary ventures, and of a sweetness and exhilaration of spirit which found expression in companionship with all living creatures.

Another that commands respect was St. Thomas Aquinas. Born in the nobility in 1225, Thomas, who early entered the Dominican Order, was enraptured by the new learning which was sweeping across Western Europe with the rediscovery of Aristotle. A devout, humble, introspective man, Thomas had one of the most logical, clear, integrating minds in the history of philosophy. His "Summa Theologica" remains the greatest compendium of Roman Catholic Theology. It deserves, and receives, respectful study from all thinkers.

Once his premises are granted, he moves to his conclusions with the inexorability of the mathematician.

Out of the medievalism were emerging the modern kingdoms of Europe. As the kings slowly established their rule over their great vassals, they found galling the claims of Popes that they were themselves vassals to whoever might be on the throne of St. Peter. In the 14th Century, Philip the Fair of France determined to elect a Pope he could control. A French archbishop was elevated and moved the papal court to Avignon in southern France, where he and his successors continued to live for 70 years as French puppets. Two remarkable women, St. Catherine of Siena and St. Bridget of Sweden, played important roles in whipping up popular demand which finally brought back the Popes to Rome from what has been called their "Babylonia captivity" in Avignon. But this return served only to expose the Papacy to other secular ambitions.

The consequence was the most melancholy 40 years in papal history, with rival Popes hurling anathemas at each other and, in the end, three Popes, each claiming to be the legitimate successor of Peter. Not until 1417 did the Council of Constance straighten out this scandalous state of affairs and a single Pope reign again. However, two legacies had been left by this century of division which were to have profoundly disturbing effects. On one hand, the Popes were determined to surround themselves with such power and pomp in Rome that there could never be another "captivity." And on the other hand, the decisive part of the Council of Constance on cleaning up the mess spread the idea widely that the ultimate seat of decision in church affairs was not the Pope but the general councils of the church.

As the Papacy sank in public esteem, movements for church reform multiplied in many countries. There were men like Peter Waldo, who founded still-existing "Protestant" churches in Italy almost four centuries before the term Protestant was coined. Others, such as the Oxford scholar, John Wycliffe, were apparently blotted

out, only to revive in the preaching career which gave Bohemia its martyr hero, John Hus. Still another type of protest, against the secularism and downright immorality which had penetrated even the papal court by the time of the Renaissance Popes, found expression in the puritanism preached by the Dominican Savonarola in Florence. Savonarola, who at first swept all before him, lost his moral authority in the ambiguities of Italian politics, and died at the stake. Yet, fleeting as seemed the influence of such men, they were the forerunners of the most violent struggle in the annals of the church. It is time for the curtain to go up on the Reformation and the Modern History of Christianity.

When Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk in Saxony, posted his historic 95 theses on the door of the castle church (Oct. 1517) he had no inkling of the dimensions of the church schism to follow. His study of the Pauline Epistles had already caused him to reject the concept of salvation as being earned partly by human works of righteous living, penance and appropriation of the merits of the sacraments and the saints. Salvation, he believed, was the unmerited gift of God to sinful man, gained by faith in the divine promise that Christ by His atoning death had paid the penalty for sin. When man experienced the inner transformation achieved through God's mercy, he then had access to God and assurance of salvation without the need of any intermediary - church or sacrament, priest or saint. Pushed to its logical conclusion, as the theologians who met Luther in debate quickly forced him to push it, Luther's declaration of salvation by faith alone and of the priesthood of all believers led to denial of the infallibility of the Pope as a source of doctrine, thence to denial of the errancy of general church councils, and finally to affirmation that the Bible is the sole and sufficient source of the Christian's spiritual guidance.

How did it happen that a monk guilty of such defiance of church authority not only escaped the extreme penalties which were pronounced against him but was able to carry a large part of Germany into revolt with him?

Largely the answer lay in the political situation of that time. Many of the German princes were fed up with the sight of revenues from their states going south over the Alps. They were thus in a mood for political rebellion so some of these German princes stepped forward to protect and champion the Lutheran Revolution. Peace was finally established in 1555. The princes established the rule that the religion of a territory would be that of its prince, thus fastening the system of state churches as firmly on Protestant as on Catholic Europe.

Martin Luther was a great bull of a man whose sermons seemed to erupt from him in an undamnable flood. In his home, drinking beer, while he regaled his guests with talk that still makes good reading, visiting like a good pastor the sick and the poor - this is a Luther of infinite fascination. But he could also flame into towering rages, vilify his opponents with disgraceful abuse, and command the princes who had protected him to crush with unbridled ferocity the social uprising of what he called "The Murderous and Thieving Rabble of The Peasants". It is strange to see how this strange admixture of personalities has persisted in the German soul to this day.

The other "Father of The Reformation" as about as different from Luther as a mortal could be. John Calvin was a wispy French intellectual with a mind like that of Thomas Aquinas, forced to flee from France because of his heretical views, he settled in Geneva. There he set up a theocratic city-state with such relentless care for the morals and beliefs of its citizens that on one occasion they drove him

into a three-year banishment. He never held political office, but since the Godly membership of the church and the franchized citizenry of the city were practically the same group, John Calvin as chief minister was the dominant figure in Geneva until he died.

Calvin's great contribution was to reduce the Protestant revolt to theological coherence. This he did in his "Institutes of the Christian Religion" which he first published as a young man of 26 to persuade the king that the Protestant faith should not be persecuted. This first edition consisted of only 6 chapters. At his death the "Institutes" contained 104 chapters, organized in four great books. To this day, this presentation of Christian Doctrine, based on the absolute sovereignty of God, remains the greatest of all Protestant theological volumes. It pursues the doctrine of predestination to the conclusion that those whom God has chosen for salvation can not resist nor fall from that choice, but that those who are chosen for damnation are doomed to everlasting hell, even though they be infants who die before they are capable of conscious acts.

THE COUNTER REFORMATION

Shocked by the revolt in Germany, which spread rapidly, the Roman Catholic Church wasted no time in embarking on opposition that is usually called the Counter Reformation.

A main glory of the Counter Reformation, from the Catholic point of view, was the organization and spread of the Society of Jesus - the Jesuit order which stopped Protestantism in its tracks in Hungary and Poland, all but wiped out the feeble beginnings of Protestantism in Italy, spread excellent schools over Europe and thrust Catholic missions wherever exploration opened new areas.

Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus is a fascinating figure, A Spanish Grandee whose military career had been ended by wounds he became a student at the University of Paris - where he gathered half a dozen devoted companions - one of them Francis Xavier. In 1534 in the church of St. Mary of Montmarte in Paris, this little group formed the oath - bound band, - later formally named the Society of Jesus - which Ignatius proposed. As a former soldier who had dedicated his armor to the Virgin, he established a military company with discipline as strict and obedience as unquestioning as in any army. He was the "general" until he died, by which time his order had grown into a great company, every recruit sworn in only after long mental and spiritual preparation. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius remain the world's most famous manual of discipline for the individual will.

From the years of the Reformation down to the present, the History of Christianity becomes interwoven with the History of Nations. England's Henry VIII made himself "Head of the Church" in his kingdom. Cardinal De Richelieu was as ready as the Tudor Monarch to subordinate the interests of the Church to those of the French throne, never hesitating to throw French armies into alliance with Protestant princes when he saw a chance to build the French Monarchy into Europe's dominant reigning house. For the next 200 years religion became an ally, and often an agent, of state craft. Dissent, whether Catholic or Protestant, was often sternly put down, not so much for doctrinal reasons as because dissent was regarded as disloyalty.

Discovery of the New World brought a race between the French, Spanish and British Empires and the religious motive was not an inconsiderable factor.

At the start the American Colonies accepted the European pattern of church establishments almost without question. Only in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and Maryland was the conception of a state church at first challenged. Nine of the thirteen colonies had state churches.

By 1776, however, there was a fast growing conviction that a church establishment was poor policy. The "Declaration of Rights" asserted that "All men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion". Later came the "Act For Establishing Religious Freedom". Finally the first Amendment to the Federal Constitution provides that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion". Here then was legal status to the principle of separation of Church and State.

Establishment of this principle has been the most important contribution of American churches to the development of Christianity. There has been no interlocking of the official machinery of the Church with the official machinery of the Government. This is virtually unknown in Europe where state subsidized churches are the rule.

As Christianity has spread around the globe in recent centuries, differences in local customs have also notably affected it. Roman Catholicism in the United States has been rather more puritanical than in Latin countries, while Protestantism in the United States has been rather more concerned with social questions than in Europe. Most American churches do recite the Apostles' Creed and as for the divisions among American Protestants they more frequently represent differing national origins in Europe or differing social groupings here than differing theologies. Of course, there are dogmatic differences between all faiths as well as within the same branch of faith.

One concerns the nature of the church. What is the church? Until recently, Protestants have tended to ignore that question.

To a Roman Catholic (or Orthodox) the church is a divinely instituted body with a priesthood primarily ordained to re-enact at the altar the miracle of the Mass, by which in a symbolic manner, thru the consecration of the elements of bread and wine into the veritable Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man is really present, offering Himself as the "food of souls". The Catholic, therefore, (and Orthodox) when he enters his church, enters a place of mystery. His devotion focuses on the altar, where the miracle of his redemption is re-enacted; there, in the tabernacle, he believes that Christ Himself is mysteriously present. But if a Protestant finds himself in this sanctuary, he is bewildered by this mystery and repelled by the notion of a sinful man, even tho he be an ordained priest, possessing the power to transform bread and wine into the true flesh and blood of Christ.

When, however, the Protestant enters his church, while there may be quite an elaborate ritual centering on the service of Holy Communion, most typically he is waiting for that moment in the service when the minister enters the pulpit for the preaching of the Word in the form of the sermon. The sermon is the climax of Protestant worship, tho too often the feeble capacities of the preacher make it anti-climax. The congregation is there to hear, not to see. But if a Catholic, risking rebuke from his confessor, finds himself in this service, the chances are that he will be repelled by its verbalism, by its refusal to point him to the very spot where he may meet God.

A second line of division is drawn by their conception of the sacraments. The difficulty is not only that the Catholic and the Orthodox say there are

seven sacraments and the Protestant only two, but that the sacrament itself is differently conceived. The familiar definition of the sacrament is that it is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace". But there is a wide gulf between Protestant and Catholic use of the word "sign". Catholics hold that the sign itself accomplishes what it stands for. The Protestant that the effects follow only from the faith of the believer. The gulf here is as wide, for example, as that between those who believe in baptism as a saving rite and those who reject that belief.

The contrast is between Catholic clarity and Protestant obscurity. Most Protestants will say that the final authority to which they appeal is that of the Word of God - not simply the text of the Bible, but that text as interpreted either by the Church thru its ordained ministry or the the spirit of the individual Christian.

The Catholic position is clear cut. Spiritual authority is a great pyramid at the apex of which stands the Pope, direct successor of St. Peter. From him the power descends to the humblest priest. The priest, accordingly, is clothed with the authority of his Church to bind and free from sin. And the role of the laity, concerning doctrine and sacraments, is to receive the spiritual gifts and admonitions which come thru the priest.

The church has taken many forms; its divisions go back to the very beginning of the record in the Acts of the Apostles, and they appear more implacable as the centuries pass. Yet despite the fragmentation of institutionalized Christianity into innumerable churches, there is a fact - the Christian church - which men everywhere must take into their reckonings and do. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

What, then, is the outlook of Christianity and its churches? If Christianity is responsible for the character of civilization, then its task is hardly more than begun. Nevertheless, the prevalent sense of unsatisfied spiritual needs among men, and of the insufficiency of other answers to their problems, makes this an hour of opportunity for religion. Freud and neo-orthodox theologians are one in locating man's ills far below the outer layers. Can the Christian churches now persuade man that the grace of God can penetrate deeper, and with more saving power, than any analyst's probing?

Never has the figure of Christ risen higher or in more compelling majesty over the debris of human failure.

Never has the Cross stood out more clearly as the symbol of man's ultimate hope.

Never has the prayer for the Church used in ecumenical conferences seemed more timely or pertinent:

"O Gracious Father, we humbly beseech Thee for Thy holy Catholic Church, that Thou wouldest be pleased to fill it with all truth, in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, establish it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Him who died and rose again, and ever liveth to make intercession for us, Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord. Amen."

END