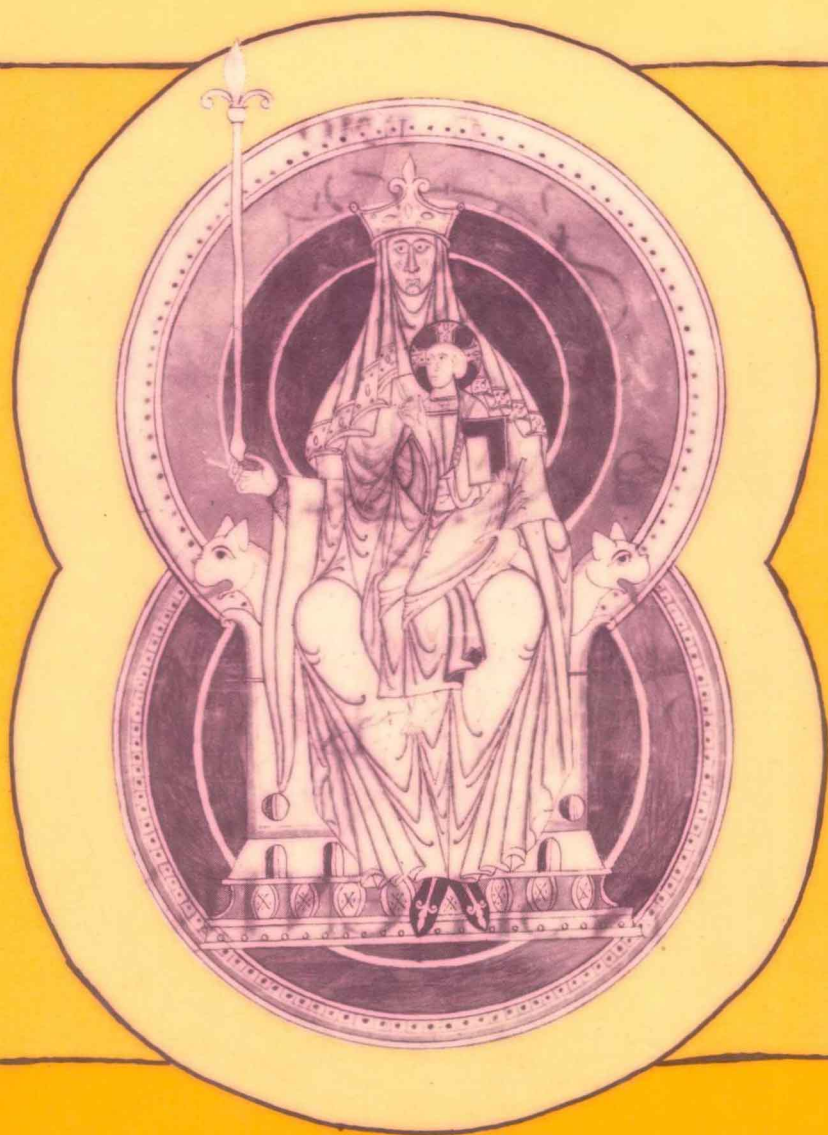


# Religion in the Medieval West

Bernard Hamilton



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Bernard Hamilton  
Nottingham, 1986

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# Introduction

Religion occupies a very central place in medieval history but one with which many students, coming to the period for the first time, are singularly ill equipped to deal. Books which are written about the medieval church, or even about popular religion at that time, almost all assume a knowledge of the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith and the organization and worship of the Christian church which many students no longer have. This is a relatively recent problem and largely a consequence of the silent revolution in schools which has transformed Religious Education into some form of Community Ethics. This creates a difficulty for those of us who teach medieval history, for whereas one can tell a student to look up a technical ecclesiastical term like 'dalmatic' or 'tithe' in a standard work of reference, concepts like the Incarnation, Original Sin, Holy Orders, and Purgatory cannot be summarily dealt with in the same way. It is difficult to explain fully what is meant by them without seeming to give a short course in Christian doctrine, which most historians are rightly reluctant to do, but it is not easy to find simple, written accounts to which students may be referred. For simple books about religion have two salient characteristics: they are intended to be persuasive as well as informative; and they are more interested in the present state of the churches than in their historical development.

A second point which needs emphasizing when teaching medieval religious history is that religion, like all other ranges of human activity and experience, constantly changes. This does not necessarily imply any relativism in matters of principle, merely a difference in ways of understanding and applying them. Because Catholicism was the dominant faith in the medieval west students often tend, naturally enough, to think of it in terms of modern Catholic societies such as those of Poland and Ireland, and transpose that kind of well-instructed religious fervour, which was the product of the Counter-Reformation, to medieval society. In fact, as I hope to show, a more accurate analogy would be with some modern South American countries, like Peru or Ecuador, where the population is almost entirely Catholic, but the general degree of instruction, practice and commitment is low.

The third point which needs to be made when dealing with the medieval Christian west is that the word 'religion' did not have the same connotation then. In our own society religious commitment is a matter of personal choice and religion itself an essentially private concern. Students seldom realize how unusual a situation this is, seen in historical perspective, and are confused when they find that in medieval society there was no necessary correlation between belief and commitment. I shall try to examine Christianity in the wider context of



## 2 Introduction

a world view, and to explain how in the Middle Ages no distinction was made between religious knowledge and any other kind of knowledge. In such a society there was no necessary connection, as there is assumed to be in our own, between belief in a religious explanation of the universe and personal piety.

The first part of this work deals with the institutional church, the faith which it taught and the means which it used to instruct lay people in it. The second part examines the extent to which the laity understood and practised that faith, and the ways in which lay piety took different forms. Nevertheless, the book is called *Religion in the Medieval West*, not *Christianity in the Medieval West*, for the west was not monolithically Christian then although it is often represented as being so. There were, for example, always communities of Jews in the west and of Muslims too in many frontier regions, while in the later Middle Ages the west gained some knowledge of Buddhism and of the other religions of Asia. The alternatives which those faiths presented to orthodox belief held an attraction for a few people in any generation. From c.1000 there were always some dissenters in the west, who in the thirteenth century numbered many thousands, and at other times were reduced to a few hundred, but they never died out and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century inherited a model of religious pluralism and did not invent it. It might have been expected that in a society in which religion was so important a force some people might, in protest, have transferred their allegiance from God to the devil. I have discussed the evidence relating to this, but I venture to disagree with some of the popes who reigned then: I think that there were no Satanists in the Middle Ages, no doubt because people realistically supposed that the prince of darkness only had hell in his gift and were not tempted by the offer.

I end the book with a discussion of the religious difficulties faced by medieval Christians. It is often wrongly supposed that they had none, because their society was homogeneous and shielded them from contrary opinions. As I have tried to show in earlier chapters, the medieval west was not sealed off from all contacts with other religious and philosophical systems; while doubts of all kinds are fundamental human reactions to any kind of certainty.

The chronological limits of this book extend roughly from c.500, when Roman rule finally collapsed in western Europe, to the eve of the Protestant Reformation, after which it is impossible to write about Europe as a religious entity.

I had difficulty in deciding which translations to use when citing Biblical or liturgical texts. Since this book is designed largely for people who are not familiar with the Bible or the liturgy, and since no single translation of either is now commonly used in the English-speaking world, I have decided to cite the Bible in the Authorized Version of 1611 and the medieval liturgy where possible in the translations made by Cranmer for the 1549 Prayer Book. Medieval churchmen, of course, read the Bible in the Latin text of the Vulgate, and, in cases where that text differs on points of substance from the Authorized Version, I have amended the passages to give the Vulgate sense. I have also substituted modern words at a few points in the liturgical translations where I think that the older version might confuse my readers (e.g. I have substituted 'Holy Spirit' for 'Holy Ghost' in the Nicene Creed).

I can claim little originality in writing most of this work which, except in a few rather limited areas, is based on my reading of the research undertaken by other scholars. Nevertheless, a work of this kind has not, to my knowledge, been

written before, and my experience suggests that there is a need of something of the kind. In one way only it is like the Rule of St Benedict: it is a little book designed for beginners, who, having with its help mastered the basic principles of the beliefs and practices of the medieval west, may then proceed to read with more profit the learned works of other historians listed in the bibliography.



# *Part I*

## The Western Church



# 1

## The Emergence of Christian Europe

### **The church in the Roman Empire**

While Roman imperial power collapsed throughout western Europe in the course of the fifth century the established religion of the empire continued to thrive. This was the Catholic church and its period of ascendancy in the Roman state had been very brief. For almost 300 years the imperial authorities had refused to recognize Christianity as a lawful religion and during that time the church was subjected to sporadic, and, on occasions, severe persecution. This ended in 312 when the emperor Constantine the Great granted Christians legal toleration. At that time there were as many Christian churches as there are now, but the largest and best organized of them called itself the Catholic, or universal, church, and it was this church which Constantine patronized and into which he was received on his death-bed. Catholicism became the religion of the court and the church received fiscal and legal privileges from Constantine and his successors, together with huge endowments. Theodosius I (379–95) made it the official religion of the Roman state.

The church's experience of Roman authority left it with an ambivalent attitude towards secular rulers. Three centuries of persecution could not lightly be set aside and even the conversion of Constantine did not guarantee complete security. Some of his successors took the wrong side in doctrinal disputes, while the emperor Julian (360–3), although brought up as a Christian, apostatized from the faith and sought to deprive the church of its privileged status. Throughout the medieval centuries the church remained conscious of its unique responsibility to act as guardian of the Christian revelation and to prevent kings from usurping its spiritual powers. This attitude was a source of much conflict between church and state, although it was also arguably a source of vitality to the church, since it prevented it from sinking into an Erastian torpor.

Theodosius' establishment of the church did not result in the mass conversion of all his subjects to the Catholic faith. The practice of pagan cults was made illegal, but that enactment proved impossible to enforce, and in any case the church was opposed to forced conversions. From its earliest days Christianity in the western empire had been based chiefly in the cities. During the fourth century the church gained many new adherents who followed the example of the court, but it still remained predominantly urban, whereas the majority of people in the late empire, as in all pre-industrial societies, were peasants. The evangelization of the countryside depended on the creation of a Christian landowning class who would encourage the clergy to minister to their tenants and this was far from

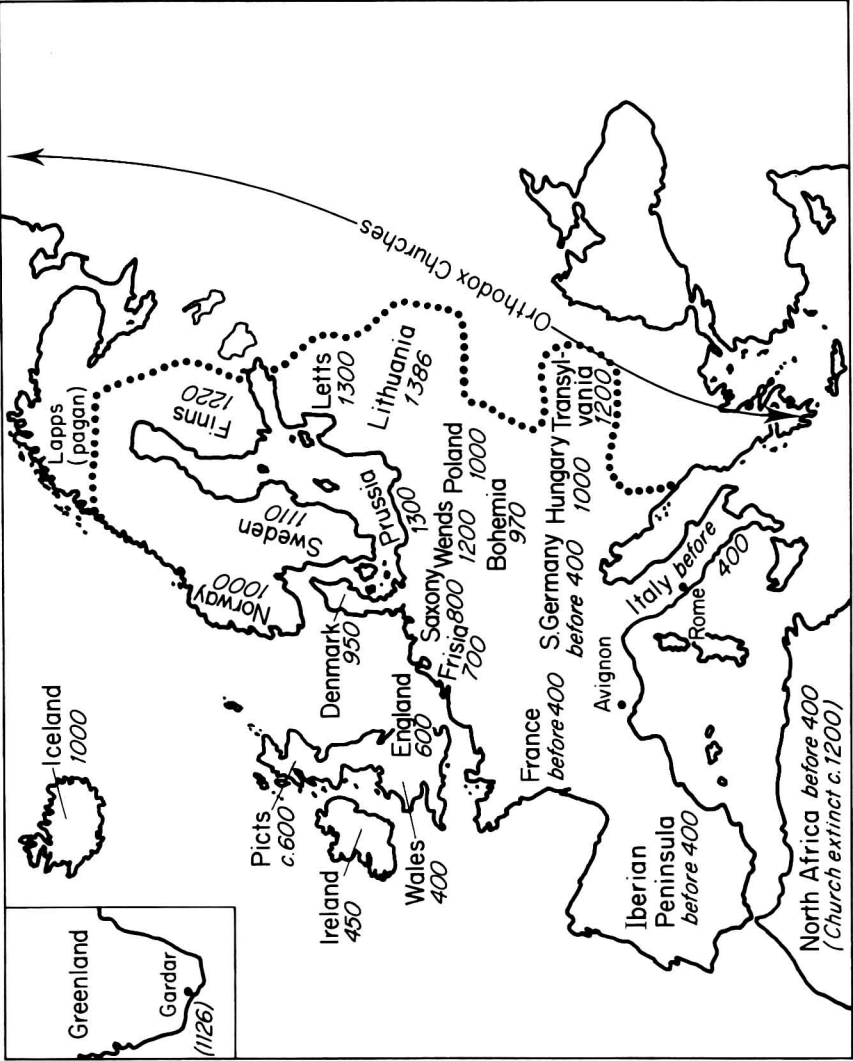
being achieved by the late fourth century. In some areas, like central Italy, the Rhône valley, southern Spain and north Africa, Christians formed a majority of the population, but elsewhere they were at best a privileged and growing minority. The establishment of the church did not in itself change this.

### **The barbarian invasions**

In less than a generation after its establishment the church was faced by a new challenge as the western provinces of the empire began to be overrun by barbarian tribes of Germanic origin. Although the invaders did not in most cases seek to destroy the empire, which they greatly admired, they nevertheless created conditions of life which made the survival of imperial structures of government impossible. In the course of the fifth century Roman imperial power in the west faded and in its place there grew up a number of independent, barbarian kingdoms. The eastern provinces were less affected by these developments. Christian Roman emperors continued to reign in Constantinople until the Ottoman conquest of 1453 and it would be possible to describe their state as the medieval Roman empire and their church as the eastern Catholic church. Historians do not use these terms, but customarily speak of the Byzantine empire and the Orthodox church when referring to the eastern Mediterranean after c.500. This terminology has the merit of emphasizing the different ways in which the two halves of the Roman empire evolved, for Byzantium was the Greek name for Constantinople and Greek came to be the official language of the eastern empire and the liturgical language of the Orthodox church. A different kind of Christian civilization developed there from that found in the medieval west.

The establishment of barbarian kingdoms in the west marked the beginning of the Middle Ages. The Catholic church survived the collapse of Roman power and preserved certain features of classical civilization in the newly evolving society. Three of those features were of great importance. First, the church inherited from Rome a concept of universality; as western Europe became politically fragmented the church kept alive an awareness of a wider community, that of Christendom, which embraced all its members. Secondly, the church's organization had been closely adapted to the secular organization of the late empire: these structures were not merely preserved, but were also extended during the Middle Ages to newly converted regions beyond the former imperial frontiers, and this type of organization, which transcended political divisions, was a concrete expression of the church's belief in universality. Thirdly, the church preserved the Latin language. Latin had been the official language of the Roman empire and the one which all educated people in the western provinces knew well. It performed much the same function of facilitating communication between peoples of different linguistic groups as English does in modern India. It was therefore the language which the church used in its public worship and it continued to use it after the empire had fallen. Thus throughout the medieval centuries, as the vernacular languages of modern Europe came to be formed, Latin remained the *lingua franca* of churchmen and of educated people. This had important consequences for western civilization as well as for religion: the Latin learning of the ancient world remained accessible to scholars, while the exchange of ideas was greatly facilitated by the existence of a single learned language in which all men, irrespective of their racial origins, could express themselves.

**Map 1** The expansion of Catholic Europe. Dates indicate approximate time of conversion.





The barbarians who settled in Italy, southern France, Spain and north Africa in the fifth century had an aristocracy who were already Christian when they entered the empire, although many of the common people may still have been pagan. Unfortunately for the Catholic hierarchy, these barbarians had been converted to the wrong kind of Christianity. They were Arians, who believed that Christ, though divine, was inferior to God the Father. Arianism had caused deep divisions in the church during the fourth century until it was declared heretical by a General Council in 381, but before that time some of the German tribes beyond the imperial frontiers had been converted by Arian missionaries. When those tribes settled in the empire, they established Arian churches in their kingdoms, which had their own clergy and used a vernacular liturgy. The Catholic church in the fifth century was therefore faced in some parts of the west by the dual problem of a largely pagan rural population and an heretical, ruling warrior-class.

### **Conversion of the barbarians**

The Germanic invaders of northern Europe were pagan. The Franks, who conquered most of northern and central Gaul, tolerated the Catholic church, but a different situation obtained in the neighbouring province of Britain, the only part of the western empire to offer sustained resistance to the barbarians. During the long wars of the fifth and sixth centuries organized Christianity collapsed in those areas occupied by the Anglo-Saxons, although the church survived in the western parts of Britain controlled by the Celts.

A less resilient institution than the Catholic church of the fifth century might have been demoralized by the turn events had taken, but it is an index of the church's vitality that it was, on the contrary, stimulated by the challenges which the new situation presented. Thus the chronicler Prosper of Aquitaine records how, when barbarian immigration was at its height, pope Celestine I (423–32) sent Palladius as bishop to the Irish. This was the first serious attempt by the Catholic authorities to evangelize the pagans of northern Europe living beyond the imperial frontiers. The experiment was successful, for Palladius' work was continued by St Patrick and by c.500 the Catholic church was firmly established in Ireland. This was of great importance for the future of Catholicism, since it proved that the church was capable of adapting its structures to the needs of a society in which there were no cities. During the sixth century Irish missionaries, working out of Iona under the leadership of St Columba (†597), succeeded in converting the Picts of the Scottish highlands, another non-urban people living beyond the old, imperial frontier.

Meanwhile the church was also experiencing success in the lands where it had long been established. In 496 Clovis, king of the Franks, who had conquered much of the former province of Gaul, was baptized a Catholic. His people followed his example and the Frankish kingdom was henceforth viewed with special favour by the papacy as the first of the barbarian states to receive the Catholic faith. A century later pope Gregory the Great sent a mission headed by the monk Augustine to the pagan king of Kent, Ethelbert. The king was baptized and Augustine consecrated to the see of Canterbury, and during the next 100 years the numerous pagan kings of the Anglo-Saxons were converted by the joint, if not always harmonious, endeavours of Augustine's successors and of Irish