

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Religion

Contents

Ancient Period

Postclassical Period

Early Modern Period

19th Century

20th Century

ANCIENT PERIOD

Pagans. Taking Western Europe to mean the areas of the present countries of England, France, Germany, Scandinavia, etc. in pre-Christian times, we would welcome the chance to discuss Western European *religion*, though hardly pre-Christian Western European *philosophy*, which in fact we passed over in our discussion of philosophy in the sweep of European cultural history. The area in question was in fact prolific with 'pre Christian religious fervor' though in that historical environment, of almost total illiteracy, infrastructural undevelopment, and an abundance of wild nature, the meanings of religious fervor were quite different from those which, say in the early Christian period, kept Christianity under the rug, hidden and clubbish. The religious practices of pre-Christian western Europe were 'pagan,' in the sense of 'closely tied to the natural habitat, ancient folkways, and distinctive nature deities—earth mother avatars, malign spirits, menacing natural forces—thunder and lightning, the power of oceans; in short, to control mechanisms by which the fragile human person, still as vulnerable as prehistoric man, could make life as secure and comforting as possible. Were we to have included the Greco-Roman orbit within the 'Western European,' which we are not doing, we would have been able to note how advanced the classical god-system was, soaring above the contemporary pagan in its capacity to explain, evaluate, and anticipate the thermodynamics of interweaving deities, in a brilliant tapestry of meanings poised around the awes of belief; a portrayal, this, of the essential constructive power, of ancient Greek religion, in the formation and maintenance of the state; an insight expressed with classic fervor by the French historian, Fustel de Coulanges, in his magisterial *La Cité Antique*(1864).

POSTCLASSICAL. (MEDIAEVAL)

Evolution. The threshold dividing pre-Christian religion from the early movements toward a new institutional religion embracing the followers of Jesus Christ, was only slowly definable, and in fact the life of the *pagans* persisted far into the so-called mediaeval period of the Christian faith. (Walter Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean*, 1885, depicts the life of a young man growing up a typical aristocratic pagan in the mid second century, the period of the Antonine Emperors in Rome. The picture of this young man's aristocratic sensibility, his aversion to the Christian ascetic world, gives us a vivid insight into the kinds of culture clash the early Christian view of the world provoked around it. From the Christian standpoint, we would be reading this threshold very differently, the way Saint Paul read it, as a barrier of fire crossed into a new salvational world, or in the way Saint Augustine (354-430) read it, as a metaphor (virtually) for a point at which the soul crosses into new territory, faces its own interior terrors, and sees an inner light which gives meaning to life. Around these highly varying views, of the new world painfully under construction by the still minority of outside the law Christians, the institutionalized figures of Roman myth were being gradually bled of their once robust claims on morals and belief.

Development. The development of the Christian religion, during the century which followed the fall of the Roman Empire, 476, is most easily traced by the landmarks of public achievement—things written,

thoughts thought, cathedrals built—and yet we can be sure that the real ‘development,’ that assured the very rapid growth of Christianity in Western Europe was due to the relevance of this belief-set to people’s lives, was, on the whole, the pragmatic play-out that the religion realized in the lives of small people in small parishes—not to minimize, of course, the importance to the religion of high-level power moves; the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (312) and the elevation of Constantinople to the Capital of Christendom; the Council of Nicaea (325), which consolidated Church doctrine to that date, and ‘confirmed’ the Church; the establishment of the influential monastic orders--Benedictines (6th century), Cistercians and Franciscans (12th and 13th centuries); the outfitting of eight major crusades to the Holy Land between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries; the outlays of funds and faith needed to cover the landscape of Europe with noticeable places of worship, ranging from country church to metropolitan basilicas, from modest arched Romanesque structures to the high vaulted Gothic masterpieces of Notre Dame (1163) or Chartres (1200). By the time of Chaucer (14th century) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) it was acceptable to speak of Western Europe as essentially Roman Catholicism.

Other religions. It is not supposed, of course, that the pagan theme simply vanished from European religious consciousness, or that other major religions than Christian Catholicism were absent from mediaeval Europe.

Muslims. Not an historical factor in Europe before the death of the Prophet Mohamed (571-632), and the rapid emergence of Islam into North African and Western Europe, Islam did in fact root deeply in Europe, and from 711 until 1492 established an influential rule in Spain, where for a significant time Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted, exchanging ideas and exercising fertile mutual respect. Besides that European presence, Islam was from its earliest historical outreach widely distributed throughout the Balkans.

Jews. Jews were settled in Italy even before the rise of the Roman Empire; they were widespread in Greece and on the Greek islands, and maintained a substantial colony in Rome until their expulsion in 139. Jews prospered in many of the developing European states of the mediaeval world, but at the same time suffered continuing persecutions—loss of citizenship rights in Rome, recurring pogroms throughout Europe, and subjection to Islamic rule during the Islamic caliphate in Spain.

EARLY MODERN

By the time of its fullest mediaeval development, more than a millennium after the death of its salvation figure, the Catholic Christian church had elaborated its theology, down to the fine points, deeply remodeled the structure of daily life for its believers, and in important ways modified (or distorted) the teachings of its founder and of its most luminous apologists. With the opening up of the early modern world, with its broad and competitive perspectives, it was to be expected that the capital conflicts which drove society would also find their expression in new religious directions within that society. The most vivid proof of that justification was to be found in the Protestant Reformation, which attempted to redirect the essentials of the Christian religion.

Dissatisfaction. Early modern religion in Western Europe comes down to a long drawn out conflict between the Catholic Church and the protests raised against it, for corruption, complacency, and immodest manipulation of its flock. Church reformers, both within and without the Catholic Church, had abounded in western Europe for more than a century prior to the date by which we mark the ‘formal beginning of the Reformation, the posting of ninety-five theses by Martin Luther, in 1517, or the Catholic response to that hammer attack, the Holy Roman Emperor’s *Edict of Worms*, 1521, condemning and threatening Martin Luther for his Theses. (Among the names of the earliest protestors we should mention Arnold of Brescia, Jan Hus, John Wycliffe, and Girolamo Savonarola—churchmen all, from diverse communions, joined in a demand for house cleaning in Rome.

Protest. Martin Luther himself was an Augustinian monk—also a professor of theology—whose highly critical views of the Catholic Church of his time were intended as critiques from within. (The critiques he raised were simply protests, over a wide variety of abusive profit-making offers-- the sale of indulgences (reduced time in purgatory,) the priority given to law and sacraments, over against scripture; the mistaken

emphasis on good works, rather than faith alone, as the path to salvation). Luther had for a long time no desire to overthrow, but only to reform, and yet the sharply reprimanding response of the Catholic Church—in its *Edict of Worms*, 1521, set the battle lines between Pope and Reformers, lines which would string out into the nineteenth century, as Catholics and soon-called Protestants would by turns diversify and then mollify their causes for disagreement. In other words, a demand for housecleaning, from within the Catholic Church, was to prove a recruiting move for all kinds of dissension against the institution which had been the backbone of Western European religion, since the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the fifth century.

Counter-reformation. From within the Catholic Church there came a Counter-Reformation movement, which developed sharply by the mid-sixteenth century. The Augsburg Confession (1530), the Council of Trent (1535); both hierarchy-heavy pronouncements doubled down on the issues of reform from within, and hostility toward, the rigidifying position of the ‘Protestants.’ On the geopolitical level Europe was to remain largely Catholic until the 19th century—northern Europe largely shifting toward the new Protestant sects of Christianity, while Catholicism dominated the South. Catholicism, as we soon see, found itself in continuing inner conflict, over its response to the ever more complex and secular demands of society, while Protestantism generated a variety of new sect-faces—Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Pentecostals—as new faith and attitude groups made space for the distinctive versions of Christological Christianity to which they remained true.

19THCENTURY.

Nationalism, secularism, Liberalism, the missionary movements, the retreats and then the resurgences of Roman Catholicism, the birth of multiple new Protestant sects, the opening up of interest in Africa, as a field for Christianization: all these complex trends, so fundamental to 19thcentury religious history, tumble forth as we make an effort to put our minds around this most formative and unsettled century of cultural development in Europe.

Nationalism. The fortunes of Christian belief—still the dominant religious presence in the region, although the numbers of the disaffected, disbelieving, and hostile were steadily growing—rose and fell with the development of nationalism in the major Western European countries. The story of 19th century religion, in western Europe, will be different in Britain, France, Germany, and on around the continent. In Britain the dominant trend, within Christianity, involved returning to the Anglo-Catholic roots which had been kept alive through the Anglican High Church. Anglican Sisterhoods, revived religious orders, and self-expression in Catholic masterpieces like Newman’s *Apologia pro vita sua* all played into a Christian revival distinctive to the British Isles. In Germany the Prussian King William III insisted on taking direct and full control of the Protestant churches in his domain-- impressing them all with a single liturgy, and a rigid hierarchy, at the head of which he governed. In counter response, ordinary Protestants and Catholics, elsewhere in the German Empire, retreated in great numbers into private spiritualities, and into the ‘holiness’ of Pietism, whose influence came to be felt far outside Germany. France, for its part, remained essentially Catholic throughout the nineteenth century. During the French Revolution the French Catholic Church lost most of its power, but in a Concordat (1801) signed by the Pope and Napoleon, after the war, most of the powers of the Church were restored—with the important exception that the Church could communicate with the Vatican only through the French government. The rest of the century saw a continual power see-saw of Catholics with Protestants and with the State. The barometer for the power of the Church, at any given time, was the number and influence of wealthy conservatives on the cultural landscape, for this persistent elite gentry remained faithful to the Catholic faith and its institutions.

Modernism. The Christian churches as a whole, and above all the intellectuals among them (especially in Germany as it turned out) were diligent in their efforts to reconcile science (the keyword of the Enlightenment) with Christian doctrine. Against the ‘scientific’ thinking of Enlightenment philosophes, the bold anti-Christian arguments of men like Diderot and Condorcet, in the preceding century, and the anti-clerical Higher Criticism of the Bible the Christian Churches foregrounded the thinking of luminaries like the Danish philosopher, Soeren Kierkegaard, and the German liberal theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher and Adolf von Harnack. The result was a renaissance of theological reflection, which represented a large

step forward in self-confidence for the Christian position. Arguments were skillfully shaped, to reconstruct the essential narratives of Christian scripture, and thus to represent the long scriptural tradition in its undoubted existential presence, while sidestepping the claims of ‘scientists,’ that religion was superstition.

Missions. It was a trademark of 19th century nationalist spirituality that nations competed vigorously for missionary presence in lands where belief was ‘undeveloped,’ or ‘primitive.’ The mindsets of this excursus of helpful people were in the highest degree diverse, and though the movement did much to spread knowledge and sometimes love for the Christian religion, it also stirred hostility among those who saw it is as covert imperialism, patronizing head-patting—Dr. Albert Schweitzer referred to his African flock, at Lambarene, as my ‘brothers, my little brothers’—or even ignorance, of the time-tested ways in which sub-Saharan Africans care for themselves.

20THCENTURY

The 20thcentury proved dangerous, eventful, and full of new moves, within the religious orbit of Christianity. It also bore abundant testimony to the presence of other faiths than the Christian—Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish-- in the formation of the Western European religious landscape.

Danger. It was the stated goal of Soviet Communism, after the October Revolution of 1917, and until the Fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, to eradicate religion from society, and to this end the Russian government applied its full force, for much of a century, to reduce the number of priests and churches in Soviet held territories—which included many of the countries of Western Europe—and to suppress religious thought and expression in every possible way. (Many of the surviving victims of this policy emigrated to Western Europe.) At the same time—from the 1920’s to the end of WW II in 1945—persecution of Christians who defended the Jews advanced harshly under Nazism, many of whose foes, in this matter of genocidal survival, were Christians, often martyrs to their faith by saving individual Jews, or on the official level, and especially through the proclamations of Pope Pius XI, whose actions saved hundreds of thousands of European Jews.

Events. Secularism, as would be expected given its growth in 19th century Europe, continued apace, with polls abundantly verifying the facts, that the majority of Europeans were neither believers in God, Christians, nor church goers, a state of affairs which provoked serious theological and liturgical rethinking throughout the western European Christian world. At the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) Pope Pius VI and the Eastern Orthodox Patriarch, Athenagoras, met to repair the historically strained relations of their two churches—a defensive move for the traditional Christian community, as it prepared itself to resist the ever rising tide of secularism. The Second Vatican Council itself went on to implement a number of the changes, in Catholic liturgy and international relations, which were directed at enriching the interface between the Church hierarchy and its worshippers; the text of the mass itself was freshly translated/edited for user clarity; permission was given for the mass to be given in vernacular languages—at the decision of the local bishop; the position of the priest, in offering up the mass, was changed, so that, with his face to the congregation—instead of to the altar—he was in direct contact with the congregation, as he carried out his sacrifice. This example is offered as an indicator, of the details into which the Catholic Church was prepared to reach, in its efforts to stem the tide of religious indifference in Europe. The Protestant Churches, faced with the same issues of secularism, may be said to have responded with particular brilliance in the abundance with which they opened to new versions of evangelical fervor, as well as in the creation of a body of theological writings—by such brilliant thinkers as the martyred pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and by daring academic thinkers like Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Rudolf Bultman.