



# Medieval Christianity

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A NEW HISTORY

**KEVIN MADIGAN**

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To my students

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*Discipulis meis eximiis*

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# Preface\*

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By the early seventh century or so, the biblical culture today called medieval Christianity was the distinguishing and unitive religious and cultural mortar of European society. By the year 1000, six or seven monarchies, countless city-states, duchies, counties, and ecclesiastical fiefdoms organized the European land mass politically and geographically. By that time, the major ethnic groups of Europe (Celtic, Germanic, Roman, and Slavic) would all be settled and Christianized. Within the midst of this considerable political, ethnic, and linguistic mix, one tradition united the continent religiously and, to some extent politically, socially, and economically: Christianity. Indeed, the church was the single institution that cut across the lives, political boundaries, and ethnic divisions that otherwise made local traditions and customs so strong a factor in early medieval Europe. One can go so far as to assert, as has the great British historian R. W. Southern, that the church was identical with medieval society and that it was this identity that distinguished it from societies that preceded and succeeded it. As Southern has also observed, the medieval church was a compulsory society in exactly the same way that the modern state is an unavoidably obligatory society. Our modern states require us to pay taxes for defense and public services, to obey their laws, and to subordinate our private desires to the good of the commonweal. Just so, baptism into medieval society required one to do all these things for the church. As Southern also observes, the medieval church was also very much like a modern state insofar as it collected taxes, administered justice in accordance with its laws, and had the power of life and death over its “citizens.” It had a coercive power in the pope (coercion being expressed most usually through excommunication or the threat of it) and a purpose to its government: “to direct man into a single Christian path.” Only the lack of a dependable army causes the analogy to break down.

The church not only formed the institutional framework within which one lived out one’s life. Every important event for the individual from birth to death (including, from the ninth century on, marriage) was marked by ecclesiastical ritual. The same set of sacraments (set at seven in the late twelfth century) punctuated the lives of Christians in northern England and Iceland, southern Italy, western Spain, and Poland. Monasteries, churches, chapels, parish churches, convents, cathedrals, and simple stone crosses covered the landscape—all professing or representing the same creed. Clergy—priests, bishops, deacons—were everywhere, as were monks, nuns, and other religious. More or less the same liturgy of the Mass was celebrated in the same language across the Continent. Certainly there were “outsiders” in this culture—principally Jewish communities and sects of heretics—but they were “minorities” in every sense of that modern word. This culture was held together by religious belief expressed in ancient creeds whose authority very few challenged or from which they dissented. Very few would have doubted the existence of a triune God who had sent his “Son,” both human and divine, to redeem humankind and to set the normative and salvific pattern for human life. Nor would many have doubted that life on this earth was a journey, or pilgrimage, to a domain more real, more permanent—indeed eternal—to be spent in everlasting beatitude with God or never-ending punishment.

A tremendous force for the unity of Christendom and for the possibility of a shared biblical culture was the possession of a common sacred language, Latin, which the church had inherited from Rome. This was a language used in all matters of religious culture, including “secular” diplomacy and politics. (The word “secular” is put in quotation marks, as medieval people did not distinguish, as we do in modern Western societies, between the sacred and the secular.) Western theological literature and art are saturated in imagery and idioms taken from the Latin Bible. The Christian liturgy was conducted in Latin, as were creeds, one of the major media for instruction in the rudiments of faith.

all centuries of the Middle Ages (though only clerics would have known the Latin in some times and places, as most lay Christians were not Latinate). It was also the language in schools and, eventually, in universities.

In his pathbreaking analysis of the “making of Europe” in the central Middle Ages, historian Robert Bartlett has painstakingly charted the outward establishment of bishoprics, especially in the Baltic region, as Latin Europe expanded eastward and northward. He observes that in the process of expansion, new peripheries came to resemble the old center of Europe. It would not be going too far to say that something like a homogeneous culture emerged in the central Middle Ages. This culture had many shared elements, including shared military technology, agricultural practices and instruments, and the configuration of villages and towns. Yet it was a culture that also shared a common religious view of the cosmos, widespread religious beliefs, and shared religious practices. These, too, were essential to establishing a common European culture. It is on the establishment and evolution of this religious culture from ca. 500 to 1500 that I will focus in this book.

Many existing textbooks have laid out this very general picture of the Middle Ages. As is the case with most medievalists, textbooks on medieval ecclesiastical history are causing my bookshelves to groan. I have learned a vast amount from these volumes. Indeed, I owe their authors a profound debt of gratitude. The best of these textbooks are not merely works of synthesis (though synthesizing the scholarship on a millennium of history is no contemptible feat), but are also scholarly works themselves, books that made us see the medieval church in new ways. I think, for example, of R. V. Southern’s 1970 volume, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. Southern’s textbook brilliantly analyzed central figures, movements, and individuals, as well as relations with the Eastern church, in the high and late Middle Ages.

So why a new textbook? My hope in composing this volume was to synthesize the important new scholarly developments in the field of medieval Christianity in the four decades since the publication of Southern’s book and to integrate them with some traditional themes and topics in medieval Christianity. I have attempted to write a narrative account of the Middle Ages without sacrificing analytical rigor or explanatory power, one that takes advantage of the many virtues of literature published in this field since the publication of Southern’s textbook. For that reason, I have spent time in almost all chapters talking about the stories of real human beings and their lives, not merely because of the intrinsic interest of their stories, but also because of the illustrative power of their lives.

Readers thumbing through this text will have noticed, for example, that I have written at length of women in virtually every chapter of the book. Insofar as is possible, I have written about their relationship not just to other women but also to men who venerated, wrote about, sneered at, corresponded with them. Such a book could not have been written forty years ago. Now a book that sidelines women to a single chapter or single section would, or in my view should, be unimaginable. All historians of medieval Christianity are deeply indebted to leading historians of women in the Middle Ages, above all to Caroline Walker Bynum, who has revolutionized our field of study. So too have scores of other scholars. This book depends heavily on their enormously stimulating contributions.

Much ink has been spent since 1970 discussing “popular” religion and the problem of a “two-tiered model” of piety that attempts to explicate Christian practices in terms of the religion of the people and the religion of the prelates. While few Anglophone historians accept this historiographical model (people and prelates often participated in the same practices and murmured the same prayers), there can be little doubt that new ways of reading hagiographical sources, miracle stories, and *exempla* (illustrative stories used most often in sermons) have given us new appreciation for lived religious practice, practice that oftentimes originated “from below” and was disciplined, chastened, approved

and very often appropriated by sources of authority “from above.” We now know much more about parish life and parochial Christianity, especially in the later Middle Ages, than we once did, thanks to the labors of historians like John Van Engen and Eamon Duffy.

Those once regarded on the margins of medieval Christianity have also attracted increasing attention, especially since the Second Vatican Council. This is the case not only with women, but also with mystics and mysticism. One need only think of the work of Bernard McGinn to appreciate how much more we now know about these spiritual virtuosi and the literature they left than we knew in 1960. The same can be said of visionaries. Some of these, like Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135–1202), were also apocalyptic thinkers and writers, as well as biblical exegetes. Here again, McGinn and others produced many studies that have advanced our understanding of this captivating field enormously. Heretics and heresy are much better understood today and are of much more interest than they were before the Second Vatican Council, with major contributions from French, British, and American scholars. Much interest has been expressed in the way in which these and other out-groups, such as the Jewish communities of Europe, interacted with the Christian majority. In the early medieval period these communities could, and did, live in something like comity in many parts of Europe. Scholars such as R. I. Moore have painted a different picture of relations among these communities at the start of the second millennium, as national states emerged and clerics, in his view, helped push such groups to the margin as Europe became, in Moore’s view, a “persecuting society.”

Contemporary history can shape scholarly agenda. Today there is great interest in interreligious relationships, hostility, and reconciliation. For that reason, and even more for reasons of deep scholarly interest, I have given significant attention to relations among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Middle Ages. Other scholars, such as Miri Rubin, under the influence of the “cultural turn” in history, have taken traditional materials, like sources on the Eucharist, and shown how they were expressed culturally and in practice. To all of this new literature, I am more indebted than I know and more grateful than I have the words to express.

I have also attempted to give readers some taste of the major debates concerning various aspects of medieval Christianity over the past forty years. I hope they come away with the conviction that history is an art of interpretation and with some sense of how sources are used in debates among scholars. Occasionally I will indicate briefly where I stand on these issues, but no student should take those verdicts as authoritative. Only deep immersion in the primary and secondary sources allows one to take such a position. These debates are perhaps useful topics for papers written in courses in which this book will be read.

My intent in this book, then, has been to produce a volume that integrates the best of traditional scholarship with the rich and important developments that have occurred in the study of medieval Christianity over the past forty years or so. I have tried to synthesize the latest scholarship on the many cultures of conversion in the Middle Ages from Benedict in the early medieval period through the Cistercians and Mendicants in the high and the Beguines and Observants in the later Middle Ages. I have written on some traditional topics because they would be impossible and perhaps foolish to ignore: the emergence and then centralization of papal power in the high Middle Ages, medieval religious life, heresy and its repression, and conflicts between popes and royal figures—not to mention those great monuments to the Christian Middle Ages, the university, new ways of learning, and the many movements of reform that mark the high and late Middle Ages. As with most new textbooks, much is borrowed (if resynthesized by the author), and I again acknowledge my debts to my scholarly colleagues worldwide; some material, inevitably, is old, and some should certainly be new. This, then, is a history that is at once cultural, institutional, intellectual, spiritual, and historiographical. It is also a textbook in which I accept the traditional division of the Middle Ages into three periods: early (ca. 600–1050), high (ca. 1050–1300), and late (ca. 1300–1500).

Above all, I have written in a prose style and with, I hope, a narrative and intellectual depth that respects the kind of reader I have imagined to be interested in this subject matter. I have not attempted to write on every imaginable period, theme, practice, or subject of interest in this thousand-year period. Rather, I have attempted a narrative that, while selective, I aspired to make deeper and more complex than is traditional in a textbook. In addition, I have tried to respect the serious and mature reader without overwhelming the beginner, who is after all looking for an introduction to a period and to a civilization that may be, in every way, foreign. If there are ways I failed to achieve my aspirations and ways I can improve this book, I should be glad to hear from my readers care of Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 06520-9040.



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As I suggested in my preface, I owe more than I can say to historians of medieval Christianity worldwide. I would like to thank them all, above all my teachers at the University of Chicago, Bernard McGinn and Robert Bartlett, now a member of the history faculty of St. Andrews, Scotland. Closer to home and to the present day, I must begin by thanking my colleagues at Harvard, particularly fellow medievalists on the Medieval Studies Committee, especially Beverly M. Kienzle, who generously helped me with issues on which she has written such important works, above all Catharism and the work of Hildegard of Bingen, and Amy M. Hollywood, for whose long friendship and acute perception, especially pertaining to the topic of medieval mysticism and women, on which she has written so illuminatingly, I am very grateful. Thanks, too, to other colleagues in religious studies and history: above all to Jon Levenson for his loyal friendship and brilliant wit; to the great Americanist David Hall for his intellectual companionship, wisdom, and fine suggestions on several chapters; and to my friend and dean, David Hempton, the distinguished historian of evangelical Christianity, for his constant support and interest in this book. To my editor, Jennifer Banks, I owe very much as usual, beginning with the idea of writing such a book. All authors should be so fortunate as to have so encouraging and supportive an editor. I also thank her colleagues at Yale University Press, Heather Gold and Dan Heaton, for their extraordinary dedication to and care for the developing manuscript. I thank my copyeditor, Bojana Ristich, for her sharp eye, sure instinct, and much-needed wit as we labored together to polish the manuscript. Thanks, too, go to two anonymous readers for the Press for many suggestions for improvements; I incorporated many of them in the final draft. To no other person do I owe so much as to my indefatigable research assistant, Carrie Bradley. She helped in a myriad ways, above all in going through thousands of photographs and helping me to choose the forty-seven figures and maps included in this book. Her tireless research on dates and terms and figures discussed is reflected throughout the book and in the timeline and glossary in particular. To my wife, Stephanie Paulsell, and to my daughter Amanda, I give thanks for a happy home and much silent laughter. Finally, I wish to thank all of my students at Harvard. Many of them read drafts of these chapters and improved them by their characteristically brainy suggestions. All of them provided stimulation in the form of perceptive observations and questions in class that often stumped the instructor. It is to them, with much gratitude, that I dedicate this book.

# Early Christianity, ca. 150–600

## Pivotal Moments in Early Christianity\*

For more than sixteen centuries, historians of early Christianity, relying heavily on early Christian sources, took it as given that orthodox Christianity, as a rule—perhaps at all times—preceded erroneous or heretical forms of Christianity. They also usually presumed that heretical sects were smaller than orthodox groups. In his deeply learned and influential *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, German historian Walter Bauer (d. 1960) demolished that long-held premise. Over the course of the decades following his book's publication in 1934, Bauer slowly proved to the satisfaction of a vast majority of historians that in many regions of the Mediterranean, so-called heretical groups were among the earliest expressions of Christianity. As a result of Bauer's work, heresy and orthodoxy are no longer viewed by most historians in terms of secondary and primary manifestations of Christianity. In addition, many historians are reluctant to label heresy as an obvious or inevitable deviation or to think of early or "proto-orthodoxy" (as I shall call the earliest forms of emerging Catholic Christianity) as self-evidently and necessarily correct. Proto-orthodox and the early Catholic Christianity were *forms* of Christianity practiced in the first and second centuries. Only eventually did primitive orthodoxy come, in part because of the dominant influence of the Roman church, to secure the majority of practitioners describing themselves as "Christians." It did so, however, largely by grappling with the doctrinal and practical challenges of the many Christian groups in the Mediterranean that came, ultimately, to be judged heretical. In so doing—and only in having to do so—did early Catholic Christianity come to define, in gradually more sophisticated and complex ways, its own understanding of the revelation handed down by the apostles. It also formed literary and institutional structures that would, it hoped, express and protect the "true" teaching and distinguish it for ordinary believers from the false.

### Nemesis: The Challenge of Gnosticism

For over sixteen centuries, our knowledge of Gnosticism derived almost entirely from the writings of its opponents. That changed dramatically with the discovery in 1945 of the so-called Nag Hammadi library or collection. It is true that third- and fourth-century writers preserved some important texts written by Gnostics themselves, and it is also true that in the eighteenth century a number of Gnostic documents in Coptic were discovered in the Egyptian desert (including the *Pistis-Sophia*, a text purporting to be a dialogue between Christ and his apostles). Still, it remained the case for very long that our main sources for Gnosticism had been the hostile writings of Christian critics in the second and third centuries, writers such as Irenaeus (d. ca. 200), Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215), Tertullian (d. ca. 240), and Origen (d. ca. 254). Documents actually written by Gnostics were often destroyed by the orthodox or otherwise perished and disappeared from history.

Written originally in Greek, the Nag Hammadi collection contains more than fifty texts translated into Coptic (six of which were already known before the discovery). The collection also contains unpublished writings, some of which are, because of the influence of popular fiction and film, fairly well known among the public. These include the *Gospel of Thomas*, a collection of sayings of the risen Jesus, including some parallels to sayings in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke); the *Gospel of Philip*, which gives us a window into Gnostic ritual; and the *Secret Book of John*, which is illustrative of many Gnostic texts insofar as it supplies a detailed cosmogony, or narrative, about the origins of the universe—in this case, a revelation of the risen Jesus to John. This text was certainly

known to hostile church fathers like Irenaeus. Published in 1977 in English in its entirety, the Nag Hammadi collection provides strong evidence of Jewish sectarian influence on Gnostic speculation and its contents have augmented enormously our knowledge of the teaching, ritual, and purpose of Gnosticism.

Among the greatest challengers to the triumph of orthodoxy were the numerous sects historians today classify, cautiously and often reluctantly, under the general rubric of “Gnosticism.” The word “Gnosticism” is an umbrella term. It is meant to describe a wide variety of religious and philosophical movements and groups in the ancient Mediterranean world. One early church father in Rome wrote in refutation of no fewer than thirty-three groups he considered Gnostic. Here we will concentrate on those that originated or grew in strength and numbers in the second century. We must stress that these groups regarded themselves as authentic Christians. It is important to underscore that different mythologies and rituals characterized these groups, and some scholars have gone so far as to question whether “Gnosticism” can even be considered a coherent category. For the purposes of this book, we will assume that the category of Gnosticism does indeed have explanatory and heuristic power and we will be stressing the commonalities among these groups.

The term “Gnosticism” derives from the Greek word for knowledge (*gnosis*). Gnosticism in most of its forms was preoccupied with knowledge regarding the genesis of the world, the origin of evil, the destiny of the elect, and the knowledge or teaching needed to liberate one from the material domain which it regarded as evil. The knowledge it imparted was to a small group of elect; the recipients of this revealed knowledge were a minority of humanity chosen to receive it and destined to return to their heavenly home once liberated from ignorance of their lofty destiny. As Theodotus, a second-century Gnostic teacher and follower of Valentinus, a leading Gnostic in Rome, expressed it, *gnosis* allowed the elect to ascertain “who we were, and what we have become; where we were . . . and the place to which we hurry; what truth is, and what rebirth is.” Usually, the author of this knowledge was held to be Jesus, one of the apostles, or an enlightened teacher, who was believed to have received his knowledge via direct revelation. Gnostic salvation, therefore, was from *ignorance*, not from sin. That is, the fundamental problem in Gnosticism was not some inherited inclination to sin, nor the inability to do the good, nor our mortality as such; the problem was that a small group of elect were ignorant of the arcana critical to their destiny.

One crucial dimension of the secret knowledge imparted to the elect involved cosmogony, or the origin of the universe, and especially the way in which the evil material realm came into existence. Most Gnostic groups believed this world to be a domain of darkness and evil, fallen, by some cosmic disaster, from the heavenly world of goodness. Like the beginning of the book of Genesis, many Gnostic myths focus on the story of a fall from the heavenly realm. Some of these myths depict a figure like Eve, called Wisdom (Greek: *Sophia*), a young divine being who may have sought more than was ordained by the divine father—again rather like Eve in the opening chapters of Genesis. Other Gnostic myths tell of *Sophia*’s giving birth to a dark creature with animal-like features. Like Eve after sin, this creature is ejected from the heavenly realm, called by the Gnostics the “fullness” (Greek: *plèroma*). *Sophia*’s progeny creates the world in which we live. As an unskilled or malefic being, however, he creates a world of matter. Almost all Gnostics were united in their belief that the world of matter was evil—thus disdaining the belief, common to Jews and Christians, that God had created this world and that it was *good*. Thus, when contemplating the material order, Gnostics, unlike later Christian defenders of orthodoxy, refused to attribute its origin to the God of goodness. Rather, it was the result of some primeval disorder, some conflict or fall, some primal glitch.

As is apparent, many Gnostic myths are allegorical or symbolic readings of the Hebrew Bible, especially the book of Genesis. Indeed, some teachers of Gnosticism explained that Eve was a representation of *Sophia* and that the narrative of the first chapters of Genesis illustrated the way

which she alerted Adam to the truth. In fact, many of the second-century church fathers attempted to refute the Gnostics by rejecting their interpretation of Genesis. Several of the texts in the Nag Hammadi collection reflect Jewish thought about Adam and Eve. Other texts have literary parallels in Jewish apocryphal literature. In short, the evidence suggests that much of Gnostic mythology originated in heterodox Jewish circles, though scholars have not been able to identify who, precisely, belonged to these groups.

More clear is that many Gnostic Christian teachers were active in Alexandria, which had a large and educated Jewish community. Strong links existed between Judaism and Christianity in Alexandria. Some early Christian teachers like Valentinus (d. 165), perhaps traveling the grain road between Egypt and Rome, eventually made their way to the capital city of the Roman Empire. At first a member of the primitive orthodox community there, Valentinus eventually became an influential Gnostic teacher and prolific author. In any case, most Christian Gnostic teachers claimed to have understood the true revelation of Jesus Christ and to have preserved the secret tradition passed down by the apostles.

The knowledge so acquired and preserved was not gained by study but by revelation of secret knowledge. This was true even though the Gnostics knew and read the Gospels, as well as the letters of Paul, who deeply influenced their understanding of *gnosis*. Yet the Gnostics were convinced that they had achieved deeper insight into the scriptures than was available to simple, uneducated Christians (see 1 Corinthians 2:6–7). The Gnostics, to employ a biblical metaphor, consumed solid food, while ordinary, immature Christians drank the milk of simple teaching (see 1 Corinthians 3:2–4). For the Gnostics, the Scriptures expressed far more than what was given in the literal, plain sense of the text. Actually, the Gnostics were among the first Christians to read into the scriptures a second, higher or “allegorical” meaning. For the Gnostic the true meaning of the text was deeply hidden. It needed to be excavated in light of the *gnosis* that had been given the reader. It should be noted that here the Gnostics shared much, interpretively or hermeneutically, with their proto-orthodox and orthodox counterparts. This advanced doctrine was expressed, in much Gnostic writing, in intentionally mysterious language, so much so that it is extremely difficult, even for trained scholars today, to interpret these documents. In any case, the revelation supplied by the Scriptures was, again, the knowledge that the Gnostic reader was a spirit trapped in flesh.

Many Gnostics also believed that in the primal fall, a spark of the spiritual or divine had entered into the bodies of *some* human beings. Consequently, the soteriological or salvific aim of Gnosticism was to receive the knowledge that enabled the practitioner to escape this evil material domain and return to the heavenly realm—how they had found themselves in their present plight, to reveal to the world that they were elected for a grand destiny, and to furnish them with the knowledge allowing them to be restored to their heavenly home.

Those Christian Gnostics who believed Christ to have been the revealer of saving *gnosis* were distinguished from their orthodox counterparts because they presumed that no divine emissary could have assumed human flesh; indeed, he only *appeared* in human form. Technically, this strain of Christology is called “docetic” (it derives from the Greek verb for “to seem,” “to appear”) and is characterized by its central conviction that the spirit Jesus only seemed to be human. Perhaps a spirit temporarily inhabited the human being Jesus, or he assumed a phantasmal human appearance. This was a critical point of disagreement between the proto-orthodox and the Gnostics because it centered on the issue of soteriology, or the doctrine of salvation. In the view of Gnosticism’s critics, if the Incarnate Word had not assumed real human flesh, humanity was doomed. What was not assumed or taken on by Christ, in their eyes, could not be saved by him; had Christ not taken on human flesh, the humanity could not have been redeemed, elevated, transformed. For the Gnostics, it was self-evident that humanity and divinity could not be united and, therefore, that Christ did not experience an ordinary physical or psychological “passion” or infirmity. Instead, he only appeared to suffer on the

cross, to die, and to rise from the dead. Rather, his heavenly soul left his quasi-human clothing at the time of the crucifixion. Teachings such as these genuinely alarmed proto-orthodox and orthodox teachers in the second and early third centuries. They soon would devise ways of sharply distinguishing themselves and their beliefs from those of their heretical arch-enemies.

## Marcion and Marcionism

A teacher who shared much with Gnosticism (and indeed was counted among the Gnostics by Irenaeus), like belief in the inferiority and incompetence of the creator god, was Marcion of Pontus (ca. 160). He was among the very most influential “heretical” teachers of the second century. His teaching, and the many new churches he created, put new questions to the emerging orthodox church as challenging as those of the Gnostic teachers. Ultimately, most of the church fathers already mentioned, though most did not regard him as a Gnostic, felt compelled to respond to him vigorously.

Born in Sinope, a port city in the province of Pontus on the Black Sea, Marcion was the son of a bishop in that city. A wealthy shipowner and merchant, he traveled to Rome around 140 and joined the Christian community there, to which he donated a large sum of money. Having soon fallen under the influence of a Gnostic teacher named Cerdo (fl. ca. 140), he began to develop his own theological ideas, which he then proceeded to explain to the leaders of the Roman church. Horrified, the leaders returned his money and then, in July 144, excommunicated him. Undaunted and bent on spreading his teachings, Marcion founded his own church. It had a ritual and organization so similar to those of the Roman church that contemporary orthodox Christians felt compelled to warn their flocks not to enter a Marcionite church by accident. One contemporary Christian, Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165), asserts that Marcion’s ideas were so rapidly and widely disseminated that they could be found everywhere in the Roman Empire by the middle of the second century.

Wholly characteristic of Marcion and his followers was the great ontological gulf they posited between the divine realm and the material world. Marcionites tended to view theological ideas in binary, dichotomous ways. They separated an inferior creator god, or demiurge—the god of the Hebrew Bible—from the sovereign God of the New Testament. So far as sacred literature went, Marcion distinguished sharply between the Old and New Testaments, the former of which Marcion identified with law and the latter as gospel. According to Marcion, the creator god was thoroughly inferior. The creator of Adam, he had permitted evil into the world. Ignorant of Adam’s whereabouts, he had to call out to find him. Every act of the creator god had its opposite or antinomy in a parallel act of goodness carried out by the Christian God. These antinomies Marcion laid out, in detail, in a book he entitled, appropriately enough, *Antitheses*. If the Jewish god taught an “eye for an eye” ethic, then, Marcion pointed out, Christ had urged his followers to love one’s enemies. Only the God of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the New Testament, deserved the name of God.

Like the Gnostics, Marcionites were docetic in their Christology. Based on his assumption that matter was irredeemably evil, Marcion rejected the notion that Christ assumed a material body in the Incarnation. Nor could he accept the orthodox assertion that Christ had been born of a woman. The central and non-negotiable elements of the emerging Christian creed, challenged by Marcion so bluntly, would induce the orthodox to fashion fuller and more complex creeds by the end of the second century.

Marcion’s view on the sacred scriptures of Judaism and Christianity were, with respect to the evolving orthodox perspective, quite radical. Unlike most church fathers, who read the Hebrew Bible typologically or Christologically—that is, as consisting of many prophecies of a suffering Messiah—Marcion read the text quite literally, and he rejected the allegorical method of interpretation (he distinguished himself, hermeneutically, from the Gnostics). He appreciated the Old Testament on

as a historical document of the evolution of Jewish religion and because it bore an important ethical code. Even this he believed to have been abrogated at the beginning of the Christian era.

Marcion had an equally idiosyncratic view of the New Testament. Persuaded that Paul alone had correctly interpreted the revelation of Jesus's teachings, he rejected the apostles as Judaizers who simply taught another form of Judaism. On the basis of Galatians 1:8–9, Marcion concluded that there could be only one gospel, in his view Luke, whom he identified as a companion of Paul. Even still, both the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke had also been perverted by Jewish or Judaizing influence. Thus, any element of Paul that hearkened back appreciatively to the Hebrew Bible elements of Luke, like the genealogy and infancy narratives, had to be purged.

Marcion's significance, then, is that he seems to have been the first to compile a list of authoritative Christian writings. His canon contained one gospel—namely, an expurgated version of Luke—and ten edited letters of Paul. Any part of the Pauline letters that hearkened back to the Old Testament Marcion rejected as Judaizing interpolations; he simply purged these. Marcion's canon encouraged Christians to begin to reexamine their own assumptions about the relationship between the two biblical testaments and stimulated them to begin to compile their own list of authoritative writings, a canon.

## Montanus and Montanism

Another group that antagonized groups of emerging Catholic Christians was an ecstatic and prophetic movement known as “Montanism,” after its first founder, Montanus (fl. second century). Emerging first in the late second and third centuries, it originated in Phrygia in Asia Minor and was thus sometimes known by contemporaries as the “Phrygian heresy.” One interesting question having to do with geographical origins is: why Asia Minor? The most plausible explanation is that the Gospel of John, the one gospel in which Jesus proclaims the coming of a comforter or “Paraclete” (often identified as an inspiring Spirit), was very popular in Asia Minor. Asia Minor was also the setting for the composition of the Apocalypse, or the Book of Revelation, which is filled with visions and prophecies. Not surprisingly, adherents claimed to have received direct, ecstatic revelations from God, many of them eschatological, or more precisely, millennial, as most followers of Montanus believed, with local chauvinism, that the thousand-year kingdom promised in Apocalypse 12 would soon descend in Phrygia. Among the more interesting elements of this prophetic group is that without question, it had women prophetic leaders, and Montanus is mentioned in the sources (primarily the *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.16.13, 17, of the great early Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea [c. 260–337]) with the two most famous of them, Priscilla and Maximilla (fl. second century). All the prophets maintained strict practices of ascetical discipline, eating little, observing hours of fasting, and abstaining from marriage and sex.

It is quite clear that the Montanists were not doctrinally deviant in the way, say, that contemporary Gnostic groups were. What made them dangerous, in the eyes of many leaders in the Asian (and by 177 the Roman) churches was the very claim of experiencing new revelation outside the emerging channels of early normative Christianity. A series of synods was held in Asia Minor—the first in Christian history—and the result was that the Montanists (again according to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.16.16) were excommunicated. Then, in 177, the Montanists were excommunicated by the bishop of Rome. Why? Again, they were not heterodox, and they practiced an admirably strict lifestyle. The issue was whether there could be prophecy or new revelation after the age of the apostles, and if so, could women be vehicles of it? Ultimately, bishops felt that prophets were too great a threat to their own precariously established authority; one group of bishops was so opposed to women prophets that it attempted to exorcise Maximilla. This was not before Montanism had captured

its prize convert, Tertullian. In the end, it was concluded that the age of revelation had ended. We might say also that the age of the history of exegesis had begun. In addition, the controversy stimulated the development of a new, important structure in the history of normative Christianity: the synod or council. This was to become the preferred way to settle disputes regarding belief and discipline for two millennia in the history of Christianity.

Almost needless to say, orthodox Christians reacted strongly to Gnostic teaching. They criticized the multitude of Gnostic sects and warned that heterodox Gnostics could easily appear to be orthodox Christians. For their part, most Gnostics thought orthodox Christians were stupefied by their captivity to matter; this prevented them from perceiving the truth. For example, while orthodox Christians believed in the resurrection of the material body, Gnostics scoffed: resurrection actually referred to the union of the disembodied souls with their Savior. Again, orthodox Christians believe that the crucifixion of Jesus atoned for sin. Gnostics argued that to the contrary, such thinking was absurd; no heavenly being could possibly have died on the cross. In fact, the heavenly revealer had come in a material body that served simply as a vehicle during his earthly life, much as a spacesuit allows an astronaut to function in outer space. Gnostics found hidden meanings in the Scriptures and derided Christians for reading Jesus's sayings and interpreting his actions in a plain literal sense. Simple Christians concentrated on the earthly life of Jesus and lived in ignorance of the revelations that the resurrected Jesus gave to the disciples. While orthodox Christians believed in a judgment at the end of time, Gnostics thought it occurred at death, when the individual soul left the body. For them the end of the world referred only to the disintegration of the dark material world, when all light would return to the heavenly world.

Christian intellectuals retaliated essentially by affirming points denied by the Gnostics and denying affirmations they proclaimed. Unlike the Gnostics, Christians identified and worshipped the God of Judaism and retained its Scriptures as their own. It was that God who had created the world, who had made it good, and who would resurrect his faithful at the end of ages. The father of Jesus Christ and the God of the Hebrew Bible were, in their view, one and the same God. Christian intellectuals emphatically rejected the docetic understanding of Christ, according to which Christ came to the world in the angelic or phantasmagoric body. They insisted, to the contrary, that Christ assumed true human flesh; that he experienced the full spectrum of emotional and physical passions; and, above all, that he suffered and died on the cross. This insistence has its roots in soteriology. Christian intellectuals asserted strongly that salvation depended on Jesus of Nazareth, the Incarnate Word, having taken on a human body. Only that which is assumed could be saved, they insisted. Redemption could not have occurred if Jesus had not taken on human flesh.

## The Emergence of Normative Christianity: Creed, Council, Clergy

It has been recognized that Christians formed three structures to express and guard the truth of early Catholic Christianity: creeds or "rules of faith" (as they were initially called), canons of scripture, and authoritative clergy, especially the single bishop slowly recognized as the authoritative teacher in the community.

One of the most effective instruments devised by the proto-orthodox against the hodgepodge non-normative Christianities was the creation of laconic or compact creeds. Few structures of early orthodox Christianity demonstrate as clearly as these primitive "rules of faith" that early Catholic faith and thought were shaped in the matrix of rivalry with ecclesiastical antagonists, above all the many Gnostic groups in the empire. Some of the earliest rules of faith, and some of the church's enduring creedal language, were first expressed in occasional letters written by proto-orthodox Christians. The example *par excellence* of this is the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 107). Whi



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