To What Extent Was Christianity A Unifying Influence In The History Of Europe? Essay, Research Paper

”Europe was a Christian creation, not only in essence but in minute detail”

The above statement can perhaps best sum up the relationship between Christianity and Europe throughout the ages. Christianity has been the strongest single influence in the history of Europe. Regardless of the century, no discussion would be complete without reference being made, at least in small part, to the Church. It is true that in recent centuries this influence has declined significantly, but nevertheless one could argue that it still plays an important part in the lives of many people. Throughout history Christianity has been both a unifying force and also a force for disunity. During the Dark Ages it was the only unifying force. By the Middle Ages people defined themselves by their religion and in Europe this religion had become Christianity. Through it’s missionary work, it’s monasteries, it’s education, it pilgrimages, it’s crusades, it’s influence on art and architecture and it’s Papacy it had united the peoples of Europe. By the thirteenth century all of Europe was Christian. It’s ideas penetrated every aspect of life and every political and economic arrangement. It’s churches could be seen in the major cities as well as the mountainside villages of rural Europe. It’s bishop’s were part of the politics of countries at the highest level and for many centuries it’s clergy played the role of civil servants to the European rulers. It helped form the foundations of modern human rights and law across Christendom. By the end of the reformation Christianity had passed it’s peak of influence on European society, and so in evaluating it’s influence, it is perhaps best to end this paper at that point. Also because of the enormous time span covered by history of Christianity and the amount of material it includes it is very difficult to cover everything and so it is necessary to be selective. However it is worth giving a brief history of the birth of this religion.

At the beginning of the first century a new religion was born and started to spread rapidly across the Roman Empire. Its source of inspiration was Jesus. It was different to the other religions of the day in a profound way. It was universal, offering all things to all men, proclaiming an afterlife, triumph over death, and presenting a road to salvation for all men and women. It emphasised the inner life and filled the spiritual void created by the Roman lifestyle. Yet it was one of many religions. There were many rivals, the mystery religions of Persia, Syria and Egypt were popular at the time and of course there was Judaism. Nothing at the time suggested this Jewish heresy could rival the other religions. Nevertheless Christianity spread relatively quickly, mainly due to the missionary work of St. Paul and, also, St. Peter. St Paul’s journeys took him to Palestine, Asia, Macedonia, Greece, Rome and finally Spain. In addition this new religion spread quickly throughout the Roman garrisons and from there was carried by the soldiers through the Empire. In early fourth century Emperor Decius attempted to wipeout the Christian faith, the great persecution lasted thirteen years, but in 313 the ‘Edict of Milan’, in which religious tolerance was granted to Christians and previous anti-Christian legislation was repealed, was passed. Soon the Emperor Constantine was converted and became the first Christian emperor. Thus the Empire was identified with Christianity. It soon became the state religion and by the fifth century the empire had become exclusively Christian. However the break-up of the Roman Empire in the West and its invasion by barbarian tribes soon threatened this Christian unity.

During the Dark ages, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the birth of the Carolingian Empire, monasticism was, perhaps, the greatest unifying force for Europe within Christianity and, although weakened, this force continued to have some influence in the Middle Ages. Monasticism’s origins lay in the East. The first monks had, in the third century, settled in the Egyptian Dessert near the Nile and the first cenobites, monks grouping into enclosures formed by cells built around a central chapel, were gathered by Pachomius in his monastery at Tabenna. Shortly afterwards Hilarion established a monastery in Syria. These were the roots of the monastic movement. However these were very different to the Western monasteries that would be established in the West in the centuries to come. They were ill organised and withdrawn. Monks were more interested in devising new forms of torture to inflict upon themselves than serving a larger purpose, economic or otherwise. They were recruited from the poorest classes, lived on charity and rarely farmed. From the late fourth century on under the rule of Basil, Bishop of Caesareja, these monasteries became more organised but never really developed from their earliest forms.

It was along the trading routes of the Mediterranean that monasticism was transmitted to the West, spreading from Marseilles, up the Rhone valley into Gaul and onto the areas of Celtic dominance, Brittany, Wales, Ireland and Scotland. By the time it reached Ireland monasticism was in a very different form too that in the east. Even when first it reached the West it had already been somewhat modified. Earliest western monks were, like their eastern counterparts, ascetics and eccentrics but were already more actively involved in the life of their society. In the West this new cult was popularised by St. Martin of Tours and the tails of his miracles, as well as by the book Sulpiciouc Severus wrote about his life. St Martin was unlike the Eastern monks in many ways. He was a rural missionary who preached against paganism, worked evangelical miracles and played a part in ecclesiastical politics. France, around the same time, saw the introduction of regular monastic theory by a Scythian from the Bobrudja named John Cassian. Who had established monasteries in Marseille. The Western ascetical movement had been provided with theology. Cassian disliked the aimlessness and lack of direction of eastern monasticism and so, to combat this, he gave the monks the aim of converting and educating .

It was this form of monasticism, with a cultural purpose, that took root in Ireland. Irish monks were learned men, familiar with the Greek fathers as well as the Latin fathers. They had tremendous cultural dynamic and were wonderfully gifted in the arts. Perhaps most important was their missionary fervour. These Celtic monks reached Scotland first and then spread throughout the northwestern fringes of the British Isles. In 563 St. Columba took what was to be the first of many missionary journeys for Celtic monks to Iona, from where St. Aidan launched, in 635, the conversion of England. In the same century St. Columbanus headed a mission to Brittany and by the time of his death about forty monasteries had been founded and Celtic monasticism had spread across a huge area of France, Italy and the Alps. Around the same time St. Gaul missionized Switzerland.

However, although this spread of monasticism was advantageous for the Church, a problem existed. This Celtic monasticism was unorthodox and displeasing to Rome. Pope Gregory I (590-604) responded by attempting to place all monasteries in the West under Benedictine rule. The Pope had learned of this rule from monks who had escaped to Rome from Benedict’s monastery when Lombards swept through Italy. The rule had been composed by St. Benedict (480-543), who established a monastery at Monte Cassino. Benedictine rule set out a plan for the organisation of a monastic community that was coherent and detailed. The rule was sovereign and no discretion to depart from it was allowed, not even by the Abbot. Benedict’s rule was also common sense, classless and timeless, not grounded in any particular culture or geographical region and exuded universality. Although it did not immediately become the norm, from the mid seventh century it was adopted by the majority of new monastic foundations and became the exclusive rule in the ninth century. With the introduction of the Rule monastic life came to be described as the ‘regular life’, life according to the rule.

And so the missionary work of the monasteries continued but now they were virtually uniform, with common rules, lifestyles and the three perpetual vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. St Boniface converted the Germans and Alcuin of York became the teacher of Charlemagne. Also Gregory the Great placed the monasteries under the protection of the papacy and many were placed under the direct authority of the Holy See and so now the monks were associated with the activities of the Church. Benedictine monks had an economic, as well as spiritual, contribution to make to Europe. Through donations a large amount of the land in Europe passed into their hands. They were hard working, highly disciplined men who spent as much time working the land as praying. Their agricultural methods were efficient and effective. They cultivated the land in a systematic and organised fashion, working to a daily timetable and accurate annual calendar. They developed huge amounts of prime arable land from swamps and forests, which had huge wealth creating potential that was to become the foundations of Europe’s world primacy. While contributing economically to the development of Europe, the monasteries also contributed to its agricultural development. Lay-farmers were often used to help cultivate land and so, through their experience working with monks, they learned new forms of farming that were used throughout the monasteries of Europe and agricultural methods became very similar in many lay farms across the West. This created a kind of agricultural unity. With the use of peasant tenant-farmers on the manors of the monasteries close supervision was needed and as a result branch houses were set up further afield which often in turn expanded into major houses and the spread continued.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries more new monasteries than ever were founded. The Cluny monastery was founded in 910 by Duke Guillaune d’Auvergene. It was essentially based on reform of the monastic movement to combat the effects that a shift to feudalism in Western Europe had had on monasteries. Cluny’s reforms included the assertion that the Church must be independent of temporal powers and that there must be complete subordination, in the spiritual domain of man and society to the Church. In addition Cluny was Papist, looking to the pope in Rome as the church’s head. During the tenth and eleventh centuries an increasing number of dependent houses were attributed to Cluny. This created a kind of quasi-feudal network. By 1109 this network numbered in the region of two thousand houses and had spread through the whole of France, into Germany, then Spain and onto Italy. Cluny helped to unify the role over daughter houses and strongly influenced other foundations in the West. Another foundation was the Cistercians. Their monasteries were very much based on the Benedictine House and they founded their first house in 1108. By 1200 they had 525 houses located in Spain, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, Austria, Wales, northern England and the Scottish border.

As they spread through the dark and middle ages they soon acquired and developed, as a result of literacy, an additional social function, as a carrier of culture. Throughout the centuries a cultural homogeneity was created within the monasteries. This function had not been envisaged by either St. Benedict or Gregory. Throughout the dark ages monasteries had preserved what was the ‘heritage of Rome’. It was here that the antique culture was resuscitated before the rise of the Carolingian Empire. They were the main channels through which the learnings and arts of the ancient World could be accessed. Although by the fourteenth century monasticism was no longer as unified, consisting of several different types of communities and existing in an increasingly complex society it’s unifying influence throughout previous centuries had been tremendous.

Christianity was also a unifying influence through education. After the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, around the fifth century, the public system of education disappeared. Together the diocese and monastery supplied the only schooling that existed. Initially ‘a church education’ was offered only to the recruits, schola interior, but in time these institutions were to open their doors to schola exterior, students that intended to use their learning as laymen. Benedictine monasteries were established from the sixth century on. During the time of Charles the Great, Alcuin was given the role of general supervisor of educational and cultural activities of the realm and Charles himself insisted on the foundation of schools, through the literate clergy and monks, so that everyone could at least learn the basic tenets of Christianity. Hrabanus Maurus, most beloved disciple of Alcuin, was often referred to as “the first teacher of Germany”. By the twelfth century Bishops were obliged to maintain a school for educating young scholars in connection with their Cathedral.

The Church had a monopoly on education. This was a Christian education. Throughout Western Europe a common language was used and that was Latin. This was the chosen language of the Church, used in books, in Church ceremonies and in the classrooms. Also common basic teaching materials were used by the Church, these having been assembled by the monks in the first centuries of the dark ages. Together this language and these materials made learning the same regardless of the location. Intelligentsia were able to travel widely and this they did, an activity never again equalled.

The first universities in Western Europe originated in the Cathedral schools and the two monastic foundations of the left bank in Paris. The friars were instrumental in the development of the university. The first university was established in Paris in 110. Soon Gregory IX recognised, in the Paris University, the rights of the masters and the legal protection, which should be enjoyed by students. The University of Paris attracted pupils from far and wide to study there, in particular to study logic and theology. By 1200 there were over five thousand students attending the university. The establishment of more universities followed quickly. These universities were originally set up like guilds. Students would organise themselves to defend their interests. In these conditions learning was protected and high standards were maintained. Paris became central to the study of theology, Bologna to the study of Roman and Canon law, Salermo in Southern Italy and Montpellier in Provence to the study of Medicine. Students from all over Europe studied and lived side by side in these universities. As with the schools all study was done through Latin.

Pilgrimages became common in Western Europe from the sixth century but between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries they reached the height of their popularity. They too added to the unity of Christendom. It became every Christian’s objective, from the time of Damasus (366-84), to travel, if possible, to Rome. This enthusiasm for pilgrimage was fuelled by the papacy and the monastic orders. Four of the principle centres for pilgrimage were Rome, Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela and Canterbury. Peoples’ reasons for going on pilgrimage varied. Some were seeking a cure, some wished for a saint to intercede for their souls and a few went just for the adventure. As the centuries passed more and more took part in these pilgrimages as a penitential exercise. Each place of pilgrimage had specific trails used by the pilgrims to reach the location, for example four long pilgrim trails led half-way across Western Europe to Santiago and there were three well marked land routes by which to reach Jerusalem. All these routes were dotted with hostels and churches, offered by the Papacy, monasteries and various nations, to provide for the needs of the travellers. From the tenth century many of these pilgrimages were highly organised by the Clunaic monks. A plenary indulgence was given by Boniface VIII to all confessed sinners who visited the churches of the Holy Apostles in Rome during the jubilee year 1300 and every hundredth year in the future. Clement VI reduced this to every fifty years and by 1470 it had fallen to every third of a century. When pilgrims reached Rome guidebooks were available and shrines were visited in order, the pilgrimage had been made systematic. Through a tradition started around 800 all who visited Jerusalem were protected by Carolingian monarchs. Also many of the pilgrims to Jerusalem travelled in large groups including ordinary pilgrims and powerful lords, as these lords were permitted by Moslems to take armed escorts.

Whatever the reasons for going on pilgrimage and wherever the starting point it was inevitable that the elite and ordinary people would meet along the way, all destined for heaven. Pilgrims all wore the same clothes, tunic, cape, hat and staff and went through the same rituals. Canon and civil laws grew around the pilgrims to protect the people and their property while on a long journey. These were the beginnings of an international European law. Also the idea emerged that pilgrims were seen as international and would not be treated as foreigners when travelling. Pilgrimage was certainly one of the unifying factors of Christendom.

Another unifying factor of Christianity was the Crusade. Although officially Pope Urban II did not call the first Crusade until 1095 there were, previous to this, for many centuries external threats to Christendom, which had often resulted in a sense of unity between those, who were Christians, under threat. In 769AD Charles Martel fought against the Saracens, who were heathens and this was perhaps the first time that such a sense of religious unity was visible. In this conflict phrases like the ‘defence of Christendom’ were used. In the eighth century Charlemagne conquered the Lombards who had seized Ravenna and much of Northern Italy and had marched south. They then proceeded to exact an annual tax from Rome. All of which threatened the freedom of the city and the bishop of Rome. Charlemagne’s actions were not driven by Frankish interests. His alliance with the papacy had completed him to fight the Lombards, although this tribe were christen they were now seen as heretics and a threat to Christianity. Again in the eighth century, Charlemagne had conquered the Saxons, an external heathen threat, and forcefully converted them to Christianity. The security of the Christian Frankish kingdom had necessitated this conquest. Some regard these wars against the Saxons as the first wars of religion. Both the Saxons and the Lombards had been brought into or brought back into the Christian fold through these embryonic crusades. Also from the fifth to the tenth century Christian Europe gained a further sense of unity through the external threats of the Slavs, the Vikings and the Magyars, all non-Christian tribes.

From the eighth to the thirteenth century the greatest threat to Christianity, and thus, Europe was Islam. In 711 the Muslims had conquered Spain and breached the Pyrenees and by 732 they had reached Tours on the Loire, just a couple of days ride from the heart of the Frankish kingdom. Christianity had taken seven centuries to progress as far as Islam had in one. Overall between the eighth and eleventh centuries the Arabs conquered Spain, North Africa, Corsica, Sardinia, Malta, Sicily and Southern Italy. Jerusalem had been in the hands of the Muslims since the ninth century but was conquered, along with Syria and Asia Minor, by the fanatical Seljuk Turks towards the end of the eleventh century. Since the invasion pilgrimages to Jerusalem had become far more dangerous and so the stream of pilgrims had turned into a slow trickle. On 19 august the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine army at Manzikert near Lake Van. The Eastern Empire was quickly being consumed and the situation in Constantinople became desperate. In 1095 the Byzantine Emperor sent representatives to Rome to ask for military assistance from the West to halt the Turks progress in Asia Minor. The Emperor’s request to the Pope had emphasised the persecution of eastern Christians by the Turks. Both saw this as an opportunity to, in some way, reunite East and West. Pope Urban II responded by appealing for a crusade to ‘liberate the holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem’. He presented the crusade as a defensive move, necessary to combat the aggression of Islam against ‘our lands’. The response to his appeal was amazing. When he first announced it publicly to the crowds they roared ‘Dios lo volt’- God wishes it.

Within the year expeditions were being prepared by some of the great lords of northwest Europe. Christians throughout the Latin Church flocked to undertake the ‘War of the Cross’, united under the banner of Christianity in the fight against the infidel in the Holy Land. In 1097 the crusaders gathered in Constantinople and by July 1099 Jerusalem had been captured. There were many crusades to follow throughout the next centuries. Crusading became a familiar feature of life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, not just against Jerusalem or the East but also to the Iberian Peninsula. In the fifteenth century Pope Pius II called for a crusade, not to reclaim Jerusalem, but to defend Europ. However none had the same impact as the first. The crusades were presented as everyone’s responsibility as Christ had suffered for the salvation of all. Counts, kings, commoners and even children took part. The crusades have often been described as ‘cruel pilgrimages’ and indeed did adopt many of the rituals of the pilgrims and one may perhaps even suggest that they felt a similar unity, in addition to the unity created by the external threat, to that felt by the pilgrims. One impact of the Crusades was that the collective identity of the Latin Church was consolidated under Papal leadership.

The Papacy was also a unifying influence on Europe in the dark and middle ages. The Bishops of Rome did not emerge as a leading force in Christianity until between the fifth and seventh century. Until this time there was a long list of Popes however it must be noted that the name Pope did not become a title exclusive to the Bishop of Rome until the middle of the eighth century. Until the pontificate of Gregory the Great (590-604) the pre-eminence of the papacy had been ill defined. The Pope had been seen as only the successor of Peter and the Bishop of Rome. He was seen as merely an equal among the other patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and Constantinople. However Gregory soon increased the scope of his role. He associated the monks all over Europe with the Papacy, restored the patrimony of St. Peter, enforced measures for collection and centralisation of revenues and initiated the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons which through the proceeding missionary work of the English led to the new Christians of the North being subject to the immediate control and direction of Rome. Nowadays he is “often regarded as the architect of future papal power”. Yet the Papacy as it was to exist in the future was not realised fully until over a century later. Other factors also lead to the increased importance of the Pope including the move out of Rome to Constantinople of the Emperor, the increasing threat of Muslims on the eastern front of the Empire and later the conquest of three of the recognised patriarchs, Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria. By the thirteenth century the pope exerted a profound influence over intellectual, moral and social life.

The Papacy was an international institution, the first international institution, the first and for many centuries the only international institution. Just one example of this is during the years 654 to 752 there were seventeen popes of whom only five were Roman, three were Greek, five were Syrian, three were from Greek speaking Sicily and one was from somewhere else in Italy and this trend continued with many more European popes in the ninth century. The popes were a unifying centre. The Pope was seen as head of the Church in the West, the leader of all who belonged to the faith, no matter where those faithful lived or what their occupation.

The first major event causing disunity within Christianity was the rapture between the West and the East. It was not a sudden occurrence. The build-up was spread over many centuries beginning in the eighth century and concluding in the fifteenth century. Many see the beings of the rapture in the dispute, which took place over images in 729 however the distance between Rome, and Constantinople was already visible at this stage. Over the centuries Rome had created a foundation for itself on which it was possible to achieve more and more independence from the Emperor. It had created it’s own income and followers and was finding it increasing unsatisfactory to remain within a state of subordination to the Emperor. In 726 the pope refused to pay taxes to the Byzantines owed because the Bishop of Rome was a Byzantine Duke and ruler of part of the imperial territories in Italy. In his defence the theory was developed that the lands controlled by Rome were of special significance and had in fact been donated to the see of St. Peter by Constantine in the fourth century. In the same year Byzantium became gripped by Iconoclasm or image-breaking. It soon became the official policy of Constantinople. Leo III decreed that the crucifix be replaced by a plain cross and that all images of saints and especially the Virgin Mary be white washed. He then tried to impose Iconoclasm on Rome. Pope Gregory II condemned and rejected it. However he did not abandon the Emperor.

Then in 753 the Pope seized political power from the Emperor. The Lombards had been advancing to the walls of Rome for sometime and Byzantium was not giving military support to the Pope. Seeking protection Stephen the II (III) turned to the Franks. At the time Pepin the Short was ruler of the Frankish kingdom in all but name and was looking for an ally capable of legitimately conveying the crown to him. He found that ally in the Pope. In 751 public approval was obtained from Stephen when he corroborated the opinion of Pepin that a king must rule in order to reign, and a few weeks later Pepin was anointed king by Archbishop Boniface. The following year Stephen claimed Pepin’s assistance against the Lombards whom the Frankish king proceeded to conquer. He then gave the former Exarchate of Ravenna to the Pope. The acceptance by Stephen revealed that the Pope’s allegiance to the Emperor had been renounced. Rome had broken with Constantinople and associated herself with the Franks. This was re-emphasised with the coronation of Charlemagne in 800.

However there had been no formal divorce. The final break did not come until 1054 and involved differences over doctrine and the Pope’s claim to papal supremacy. The Greeks were accused of omitting the Filioque from their creed for centuries. They were also criticised for using leavened bread for communion, for fasting on Sundays and for various other practices. The Pope wrote the following to the Patriarch of Constantinople “Rome is mother and her spouse is God. Constantinople is a naughty and corrupt daughter, any church which descents from Rome is a confabulation of heretics, a conventical of schismatics and a synagogue of Satin”. Nevertheless he did offer to give papal support to the Greek Empire if the Greek Church accepted the supremacy of the Pope. The Greeks refused, the Western Church was condemned for Latin heresies in creed and in practice and the papal legates were excommunicated. For their part the legates had already excommunicated the Patriarch for refusing to recognise their powers.

From this point there were two universal Christian Empires and two universal and orthodox Christian Churches, each with their own head, own doctrines and own followers. In the following centuries there were two major attempts to heal the split. At the Council of Lyon in July 1274 the Greeks actually accepted papal supremacy and agreed to insert the filiogue into the Creed. However Emperor Michael was unsuccessful when he attempted to force compliance among his people with the agreement. In addition Gregory X’s successors in the West did not make its assimilation any easier. After the Emperor’s death Greek orthodoxy was restored and Michael’s successor was excommunicated for persistently failing to implement the agreement. A final attempt was made to reunite East and West at the council of Florence in 1439. This attempt was made mostly due to the fact that the threat to Constantinople from Islam was increasing daily and was reaching crisis point. Once again the Greeks gave way on all matters of substance and the Union was formally sealed in the decree Laetantur coeli of 6 July 1439. However the Union was not supported by the Byzantine populace and orthodox clergy. The Eastern Patriarchs condemned it. Some protested that they were ready to turn Turk rather than Papist.

In Moscow the fallout from the Union resulted in the establishment of a Separate Russian Orthodox Church. The council had failed to heal the schism and had in fact only created more disunity. On 29 May 1453 Constantinople was sacked by the Ottoman’s and European Christianity remained divided. One author has even called the episode of the Union of Florence “one of the most pathetic episodes in the scandalous annuals of Christianity”.

The ‘Great Schism’ was also a disunifying influence on Europe. In 1303 pope Clement V became the unlikely successor of Benedict Ix. He had been an outsider acceptable to both Bonifacian and French parties within the College of Cardinals. During his pontificate he was forced to give priority to French affairs and had created enough French cardinals to swing the balance of power within the college in their favour. He was a sick man and never felt able to travel to Rome and so in 1309 he set up residence in Avignon. This was seen as a temporary home for the Papacy and was not intended to become permanent. However after Clement’s death, although the new pope, John XXII, had promised to restore the Holy See to Rome serious troubles in Italy prevented him from keeping his promise. This situation was only profitable for the French and was infuriating to other states and Christians. In 1367 Urban V did return to Rome but was back in Avignon by 1370 as the situation in Italy was diabolical.

Finally Gregory XI, having no choice because of the political situation in Italy and the resolve of St. Catherine of Siena, returned to Rome in 1376. A troubled year followed and his death was the only reason why the Pope did not return, as planned, to Avignon. Urban VI was elected after Gregory’s death. It was the first time in nearly 75 years that a Pope had been elected in Rome and the populace had demanded a Roman pope. Soon after the election the cardinals were quarrelling with the Pope. Not only had the French cardinals protested that they had acted under the influence of terror but now Urban was openly reproving their way of life, cutting off some of their sources of income and threatening to create more Italian cardinals. Their reply to these actions was to leave Rome, declare the election null and void and elect a new pope. Clement VI, a Frenchman, was their choice and after a failed attempted to capture Rome they returned to Avignon and re-established the old papal offices. Nevertheless Urban refused to accept his disposition, instead creating 29 new cardinals and excommunicating those who claimed to have disposed him.

Europe was split. Clement was acknowledged by the King of France and his allies, Aragon, Castile, Navarre, Sardina, Sicily, Scotland and some parts of Germany. Urban was acknowledged by the remaining states of Europe, most of Germany, England, Flanders and the Northern Kingdoms. Two groups were created, one under the influence of France and the other under the influence of England. The people had little choice but to support the choice of the princes, unless they were in revolt.

The split continued with the election of new popes, on both sides, each time a current pope died and the representatives of each line continued to claim to be the legitimate ruler of the Whole church. Then in 1393 the French were offended by the election of a Spanish Pope at Avignon and urged him to resign. Benedict XIII refused and so three years later the support and allegiance of the French Church was withdrawn from the Avignon Pope. The Church then began to organise itself on national lines practically independent from papal rule. Bohemia and Hungary soon followed and it became obvious that the Church was in serios danger of breaking up. A General Council of the Church was convened in Pisa in 1409 to find a solution to the problem. Both Popes were summoned before the Council, failed to appear, were both declared as notorious schismatics and heretics and deposed. The Holy See was declared vacant and Alexander V was elected and established in Rome. Neither Pope accepted the act of disposition and so instead of solving the problem the Church had now created a third pope.

Finally a solution was found at the Council of Constance (1414-1417). It was decided the only means by which unity could once more be achieved was for all three popes to be disposed in order to place a single pope on the throne. In the end John XXIII was deposed, Gregory XII renounced the tiara and Benedict XIII was deposed and condemned as a heretic and schismatic. Martin V was elected in 1417 and once more there was only one pope. However the damage had already been done. National conflicts had been accentuated. The Church had lost much of the respect of the laity. The devotion and affection once felt towards the Pope was diminished. Throughout the schism the morals of the Popes and their courts had fallen deeper and deeper into disrepute. The time at Avignon, before Gregory’s return to Rome, has been called the ‘Babylon Captivity’. Even the churchmen were revolted by the activities of the Popes. Mutual excommunications, war and political intrigue, corruption, self-indulgence, these were all embroiled in the popes reigns. Simony, nepotism and favouritism became absurdly prevalent, with money becoming increasingly the master of the hierarchy. Increasingly the laity was observing a side of the Papacy, which was, in the years and centuries to come, to create even more disunity within Christianity and Europe. The authority of the Church was derived from its unity. During the time of two, or even three popes, this unity had disappeared and so the Papacy’s authority had been greatly eroded. The French, Bohemians and Hungarians had been on the verge of becoming independent national churches. Edward P. Cheynay summed up the consequences of the scandal very well

“The Church was too closely interwoven with the political, economic and religious life of the time, to strong in its privileges and duties as a national body and too important as the only international organisation in existence to show evidence of dismemberment and decay without creating general dismay”

The Church had been humiliated, weakened and it’s blatant abuses paraded for all of Christianity to cringe at.

The schism had also increased the spread of heresy. This was the period when Wycliffe had written his essays in which he argued that the papacy and the Church had no divine authority over or political value for religion. It was at this time also that the Lollard heresy spread throughout England and the Hussites began to emerge in Bohemia. The schism had ‘ cut through the universal church like a deep and sceptic wound’ and had ‘debased the coin of religion’.

As was already mentioned the ‘Great Schism was one of the major influencing factors of the increase in heresy that was to follow in the decades and centuries to come. In the Dark Ages heresy was relatively rare in the West. Now the Church was being shaken by these movements. By the mid twelfth century heresy had become a major problem, on a scale not experienced since the Goths and Vandals had given their allegiance to Arian beliefs in the fourth century. In addition to becoming more popular it was also becoming more durable. One of the first of the ‘new breed’ of heretic was John Wycliffe in England. His arguments were not directed towards Christian doctrine or morality but at the Church and, in particular, the Papacy. He taught that the Pope was the antichrist, there was no difference between priests and laymen, Christ was the only head of the Church and, perhaps most important, England was absolutely independent of the pope, with the kings temporal power being derived directly from God. He united the religious and political aspects of the matter and, in so doing, drew people’s interest to the religious question through their interest in the political question. He was supported by many nobles and burgesses, who resented the interference of a foreign power in their affairs, and, incredible as it may seem, the lower clergy were preaching his doctrines among the people. Even the English Parliament saw him in a favourable light, with many of its members being his most loyal supporters. Wycliffe undermined the peoples respect for religious authority and his religious movement is thought to have caused the peasant revolts in England in 1381. This group of people were christened the Lollards and even after Henry IV turned against them they still managed to influence religious thought in England for many centuries to come.

Wycliffe’s doctrine was then transported to Bohemia by Jan Hus. His teachings became associated with the outburst of nationalist passions and shock the foundations of the Church in Germany. The Slav population had regarded the Church as that of the Germans and so when Hus emerged his religious zeal fanned the flames of nationalist passions among the people. The Council of Constanz ordered him to be burnt at the stack, however this did not put an end to his heresies. His followers, the Hussites, were infuriated by his death and ‘launched what in effect was a national riding and the first reformation.’ The Catholic clergy were dispersed, its property confiscated, the Churches and monasteries destroyed and the National Czech Church was founded. The Pope’s response was to announce a general crusade against the heretics and for years huge invading armies of German crusaders attempted to squash the Hussites, without success. In the end peace was made when in 1436 the two sides decided to content themselves with their present situation. By this time Hus’ doctrine had also spread to Poland, Hungary and Croatia, where his followers language was readily understood. The religion even found supporters within the poorer inhabitants in German Regions of Austria.

There were other heretic movements also in existence around this time. The ideas of the Bogomils, who denied that Christ had established an organised Church and were dualists, spread quickly in the West and took root in the Balkans. In 1199 the Ban of Bosnia and his court declared themselves Bogomils and the religion also gained a strong grip on Hum (Herzegovina). By the 1160, the Cathars were another movement who were well established in Western Europe. Some believe the spread of Catharism was due in no small part to the arrival of Bogomil missionaries in the West. In some places they were numerous enough, as in the South of France, to organise churches and bishoprics, and constituted an alternative church. They even had a general council in 1167. This heresy found support in Italy and the South of France, amongst other places. The members were even protected in many places by the local lords. To crush this heresy the Pope declared yet another crusade, which along with the Inquisition, which had become the main tool of the Church in it’s fight against heresy, was relatively successful in reaching it’s objective. Yet no matter how many crusades were launched, how many heretics were burnt or hoe powerful the Inquisition became the Church could never be totally successful in bringing all the people back into the folds of the Church again.

The birth of the Reformation can be attributed to a number of factors including the new learning, the need for reform within the Catholic Church, the spread of knowledge due to printing. By 1500 the Church was in a state of deep crisis. The laity was becoming increasing disillusioned with the lifestyle of the clergy. Many priests had families and the practices of simony and nepotism was wide spread. It was obvious that the Church needed reform, many of its clergy were crying out for reform and yet those in a position to initiate the necessary measures refused to listen.

Luther, an Augustinian monk, was born and raised in Wittenberg in Saxony and eventually became professor of Theology at the Saxon University in the town. He first came to prominence when on 31 October 1517 he nailed his 2ninety five thesis” to the door of Wittenberg Castle. In these theses he attacked the practice of the sale of indulgences which were being use to help finance the building of St. Peter’s in Rome. It had been universally assumed that the pope was very rich, which in reality was not true, and on nailing his these to the door Luther asked why the pope not did pay for the building with his own money, instead of using the money of poor Christians . The theses were immediately translated into German and widely distributed causing great excitement. However his attack was on the theological basis of indulgences more so than the morality of their sale. In the aftermath of this action Luther’s position became clearer. His belief was that man could be saved by faith alone and not by the mechanical Christianity of the Catholic Church. Through his preaching and writings, from 1517 he averaged a book every fortnight until his death, this heresy spread throughout Germany and beyond. By 1520 he had been excommunicated from the Church. A ban was pronounced on Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521 but could not be enforced. This lead to a split in German politics with many advocating his punishment, while others strongly opposed it. He had called on the princes to reform the church within their territory, trying to reform the church from the ground up.

In 1529, at the Diet of Spier, the princes, who would gain economically and politically from a split with the Church, delivered their ‘protest’ against the Catholic powers. They then went on to present a measured summary of their beliefs the following year. The Emperor responded by ordered their submission, and they refused. Lutheranism was quickly adopted in several states and in most German cities and soon became the state religions of Denmark and Norway. The protestant movement was placed on a military footing two years later with the formation of the Schmalkaldic League which by 1539 had extended to include a vast area of Germany. Luther and his Church were now secure.

The other major figure of the reformation was Jean Calvin, the founder of the most widely influential branch of Protestantism. He was more radical than Luther, including the doctrine of predestination in his teachings and he saw it as the duty of the Church to protect the preaching of Christ. He took control of the city of Geneva in 1541 and created a total Christian society with a new system of state and ecclesiastical government. His teachings were quickly spread throughout Western Europe by preachers trained in his theological school in Geneva. By 1560 Calvinism was the sole religion of Scotland, in France it quickly spread into the former Albigension lands in the South and the West and into urban populations of all provinces, the Hungarian city of Debrecen became the ‘Calvinist Rome’. It also became a popular religion in other places like Poland, Bohemia and the Netherlands.

In England at the time Henry VIII was fighting with the pope to grant him a divorce because of his obsessive desire for an heir. The Pope’s refusal gave him the excuse needed to break with the Church. He had gained the support of his parliament and was anxious to bring the Church in England under state control so that he could benefit from the immense material advantages of attacking the Church’s privileges and properties. In 1532 England cut financial payments to Rome and by 1534 Papal authority had been completely abolished.

The reformation had created three religions in Western Europe each of which was universalistic in its outlook and each claiming jurisdiction over the areas it controlled. Even the illusion of unity had disappeared and ‘with Europe split into three camps, the difference of religion was a deep motive for fear and political disunity.’ Even Protestants themselves were splitting into more rival factions. Also peaceful co-existence between the various religions was non-existent. With all this division and fragmentation people began to talk less and less about Christendom and more and more about Europe.

It is clear from the above account of Christianity, that it has moved from being a unifying force in it’s early history, and the early history of Europe, to becoming a force of disunity in later centuries. Yet it must be remembered that, to have the ability to cause fragmentation in Europe, Europe first needed to have a unity that could be divided, and this original unity was created by the Church. If this unity was not provided in the early centuries it is very unlikely that we would have the Europe of today. It is true that the division of East and West Christianity was a cause of disunity in Europe for many centuries to come and the Reformation was a time of much fragmentation. However it must be remembered that the results of the Reformation were due as much to the political ambitions of many leaders as they were to the split in the Church.

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