

HERESY HANDOUT: A CONVENIENT GUIDE TO ETERNAL DAMNATION

Christianity from its inception had difficulty maintaining its tenets in a population as diverse as Europe's. Strange mutations of Christianity kept popping up and they had to be reintegrated into the mainstream church. The "official" standard of belief is **orthodoxy**. On the other hand, **heresy** (or **heterodoxy**) refers to "unofficial" beliefs conflicting with the doctrine of the church fathers. Heresy becomes an actual crime under the Theodosian Code (438 A.D.), and being a heretic means damnation according to medieval thinkers. Most heresies fall into four general tendencies:

(1) **Dualistic** heresies argued that two equally powerful spirits--a benevolent deity and a malevolent counterpart--were in constant warfare to control the universe. In orthodox medieval Christianity, the church fathers interpreted Satan as a being inferior to God. The devil--though rebellious--is merely a fallen angel who carries out God's will (i.e., he only torments or tempts humanity when God allows him to, *à la* Job).

Dualistic heresies tended to see the two forces as equals, and many argued that the material world was entirely evil, in contrast with the orthodox position that the creation of God was "good, but fallen."

(2) **Antinomianism** covers any heresy that suggests an individual's religious experience outweighs the authority of church hierarchy, its scripture, or canon law. Arguing the scriptures are self-contradictory is also considered antinomianism.

(3) **Docetism** occurs in any heresy that suggests that Christ was a being of pure spirit rather than having a corporeal body. Thus he never really "died" on the cross. (The Arian tribes, following Bishop Ulfilas's example, were big on docetic beliefs, as are somewhere between forty and eighty million Coptic Christians in the Middle East and Africa today.)

(4) **Subordinationism** is the heretical doctrine that one or more of the spiritual entities in the trinity was subordinate to the others. For instance, privileging the Son over the Holy Ghost, or vice versa.

These four general beliefs manifested in dozens of heresies during the time between the first century A.D. and 1517 A.D., when Martin Luther wrote his theses and launched the Protestant Reformation. Note that all protestant churches are considered schismatic or heretical by medieval standards of orthodox Catholicism. Below are more specific examples of heresy up to the end of the fifteenth century:

Gnosticism (70-200 A.D.) existed in dozens of complex varieties, many of them based upon Neo-Platonic or Zoroastrian ideas. Gnostics believed in a dualistic universe and a docetic Christ. The heresy died out by the end of the 3rd century A.D.

Montanists (150-451 A.D.) were heretics that wanted reformation of the church. Their sect was emotional, sensational, and almost "charismatic." They attacked the authority of bishops and churchly institutions, required complete celibacy of all Christians (no marriage allowed), and they wanted a different date established for Easter. Many Montanists, such as Tertullian, wanted to become martyrs like the original Christians in Rome, and they tried to set up circumstances that would assure such a death. Two of their major prophetesses, Priscilla and Maximilla, constantly prophesied disasters that never happened, much to the Montanists' chagrin.

Arianism is a heresy centered around the nature of Christ. Early Arianists attacked the official doctrine that Christ existed before his birth, they argued that Christ was theoretically capable of sin, and they advocated the Caesarean creed as opposed to the Nicene (Apostle's) Creed. Later Arianists argued that, since God is not capable of sin and Christ theoretically was as a mortal man, Christ could not be divine. Other Arians were docetic, and they believed Christ had no physical body. The Coptic churches of Africa, Egypt, and Syria still follow Arian beliefs today.

Manichaeism is an eclectic heresy similar to Gnosticism. The Manichees viewed the world in dualistic terms, equating "light" with the benevolent, spiritual God of the New Testament, and "dark" with the evil material god Jehovah of the Old Testament. The light and dark of the universe is currently mixed together. Although man is material (i.e., of the dark), many humans do contain seeds of spiritual light within them, which can be freed after death by a practice of strict vegetarianism and celibacy. Many Manichaean beliefs included reincarnation until each individual achieved salvation and broke the cycle of rebirth--a belief shared in the **Origenian heresy**--which stated even Satan and the fallen angels would one day achieve salvation. One of the worst sins for a Manichee was procreation, since conceiving a child "trapped" a spirit in a material body. Manichees believed the world would be destroyed eventually, and the kingdoms of light and darkness would return to a state of pure separation. Manichaeism may have survived in later, similar heresies such as **Bogomilism** and **Paulicianism**. For a short time in his youth, St. Augustine of Hippo practiced this heresy before his famous conversion to orthodox Christianity.

Donatism argued that the sacraments are only valid when a priest in a state of grace performs them. If a corrupt priest performed communion, baptism, or marriage rites, these rites were invalid and conveyed no spiritual benefits upon the congregation. Some scholars read Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* (in which the Pardoner is a corrupt Church official selling papal indulgences) as Chaucer's rebuttal to Donatism.

The **Cathars** (*alias* Albigensians, 1150-1244) were similar to the Manichees. They were centered in southern France and were eventually wiped out in the Albigensian Crusade, a war the Fourth Lateran Council authorized in 1215. Not only did Cathars view the world in dualistic terms, they viewed Christ as docetic and rejected the sacraments. Physical objects were considered too "material" for spiritual enlightenment, so Cathars condemned the use of water during baptism and the use of wine during communion. They also despised the idea of worshipping God within a cathedral, and they considered the cross to be a foul symbol of Christ's torture. (These tendencies did not endear them to the papacy.) The Cathars practiced pacifism; they abstained from consuming eggs, meat, and milk, and they held all

property in common. Like the Manichees, Cathars believed that birth was the act of trapping free souls in the evil physical world, so they considered pregnancy to be anathema and probably performed crude abortions. They considered all reproductive sexuality (even between married couples) to be the worst of sins. Many Cathars, after reaching the highest rank possible within their religious hierarchy (the rank of "*Perfecti*" or "*Bonhommes*"), would undergo the *endura*, a sanctified form of suicide through starvation. The mainstream church's intolerance of heresy increased through the fear of Cathar practices, which had spread rapidly at the time of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 A.D.). There was much bitter blood between mainstream Christians and Cathars. A notorious legate named Arnoud, the Abbot of Citeaux, led crusaders against the last Cathar stronghold. When the papal troops asked what they should do with the captured city (since many orthodox Christians resided there along with Cathars), his instructions were, "Kill them all; God will sort out his own." The brutality of the Albigensian crusade haunted Europe for the next four hundred years; as a response to this heresy, the Fourth Lateran Council established the **Inquisition**--which would later grow into the most notorious and cruel church institute in the early Renaissance.

Wycliffites were heretics following John Wycliffe (1324-84), a contemporary of Chaucer, Margery Kempe, and Julian of Norwich. According to Wycliffe, laymen should be able to officiate over the Eucharist (as opposed to priests alone) and the selling of papal indulgences was evil. He accepted the idea of the "Real Presence" of Christ in the eucharist, but he did not accept the idea of physical transubstantiation into blood and body. Even worse, he advocated the production of vernacular bibles (i.e., written in English rather than Latin). Wycliffe later recanted and returned to orthodoxy, but a radical fringe-group of his followers continued making trouble; this group was the **Lollards**. The Lollards were busy heretics in the fourteenth century. They became involved in the Peasant Revolt of 1381, they made illegal translations of the Bible, and they allowed women to be wandering preachers. If the authorities captured a Lollard who would not recant, they would burn the deviant at the stake. Margery Kempe is herself accused of being a Lollard, probably because of her gender.

Noteworthy and Unusual Religious Practices of the Medieval World

Modern readers face two different challenges in understanding medieval literature. If readers are agnostic, they may be unaware of the Bible and basic church doctrine. If the modern readers are already familiar with the precepts of Christianity, they may mistakenly interpret medieval belief along the lines of modern practice. Keep in mind that many medieval beliefs are alien to modern Christianity, and they are difficult to understand without taking into account the unique nature of medieval spirituality. Rather than treating the following examples as a freak-show, consider them as potential insights into the psychology of the medieval mind. Consider how intense the emotional fervor and how unswerving was the belief of the Middle Ages. The following practices were all accepted by the medieval church as orthodox rather than heretical at some point in history.

Puss-Drinking and Scab-Eating--The general populace scorned lepers for their appearance and disease. As an act of humility and caring, many female saints such as St. Catherine would care for these "untouchables" by kissing or licking away the puss in their wounds then eating the scabs. People considered these saints especially holy.

Flagellants--Either as a masochistic form of penance for fleshly sins or as a symbolic gesture of subduing the flesh, flagellants would whip themselves until they bled. Often they would form lines and parade in the hundreds as they whipped themselves and marched from town to town singing hymns or calling upon other sinners to join them. The first recorded outbreak of this social phenomenon was in 1260. Like flagellation, **wearing a hair shirt** was a method of penance or symbolic chastisement of the body. Beneath outer clothes, one would wear a shirt with rough, scratchy hair on the inside in order to rub the skin raw. It served as a reminder not to become too comfortable with the flesh. Later popes condemned this practice--but it remained popular with the general public. In the Celtic tradition, Saint Kevin (Irish *Coemghen*) was famous for his "**nettle-bathes**," when he would plunge himself naked in thorn bushes in order to purge his flesh of sexual desires.

Stylite Monks--(technically hermits rather than monks) These fellows were continental rather than British. These men would take a ladder, climb up to the top of a ruined Roman column, sit down, and then kick away the ladder, vowing to remain there contemplating God until they died. In some accounts of stylite monks, they survived as long as twenty years, relying upon handouts from strangers who would pass food and water up to them using a rope and basket. Examples include Saint Simon the Elder and Saint Daniel Stylites. Similarly, **Irish Sailing Monks** were a phenomenon more common in Ireland than in England. Technically hermits rather than monks, these men would board a coracle (a small boat) and put themselves to sea without any provisions, trusting that, if it were God's will to spare them, the sea would carry them to an isolated island where they would build a hut and live out their days in isolation. Numerous monasteries on remote Irish islands originated from a single hermit undertaking such a voyage.

The Anchorhold--Anchorites and anchoresses would take funeral rites, wash themselves with holy water, and allow themselves to be sealed away in a walled enclosure attached to a church. Like stylite monks, they would rely on God to provide them with food and water through the kindness of passers-by, and live out their days as if already dead to the physical world in the hopes of enriching their inner, spiritual life. The writer Julian of Norwich is one example of an anchoress.

Mendicant Friars--Professional beggars sponsored by the church, these wandering monks would travel from place to place preaching and begging in order to raise funds for charity, church construction projects, or crusading missions. They were supposed to travel in pairs in order to keep each other from temptations. The best way for a modern student to imagine a medieval friar is to imagine a cross between a circuit preacher, a monk, and a homeless person.

Votum Stabilitatis--Along with **vows of chastity** (vows never to have sex), **vows of poverty** (vows to own no material goods), and **vows of obedience** (vows to obey the abbot's teachings), the *votum stabilitatis* was the vow new monks and nuns made never to leave the monastery for the rest of their lives. Only the outrider would regularly leave the monastery to do business with the outside world. Note that friars were not bound by the *votum stabilitatis*.