

Lecture 9: Christian Apologetics from Constantine to the Reformation

Apologists from Constantine to the Reformation

During this period Christianity was the favored religion of the Roman Empire. During this same time the old Roman Empire disintegrated and its territory was taken over by the various barbaric tribes and other ethnic groups. Later a strong and sustained attack came from the Moslems. The Western church divided into two main branches: the Roman Catholic Church (centered in Rome in the West), and the Greek Orthodox Church (centered in Byzantium in the East). The general level of learning in the church, as in society as a whole, declined markedly until the Renaissance. Yet there were many bright lights during these centuries. In this section we will discuss only a few of them.

Athanasius

A.D. 296-373

Became bishop of Alexandria at young age; preferred persuasion to force; controversy-filled life (5 exiles, including 17 years of flight and hiding—in Alexandria houses or in desert among hermits, etc.)

Wrote many letters and works against Arianism (that God the Son is a created being, only similar to God the Father), including *Discourse Against the Greeks*, and *Discourse on the Incarnation of the Word*; the one primarily used to defeat Arianism in the church and maintained the orthodoxy of the church (God the Son is the same essence with God the Father); when told that he was standing alone, his reply was “If it is the world against Athanasius, then it is Athanasius against the world!”

“G. L. Prestige declares that almost single-handedly Athanasius saved the Church from pagan intellectualism, that ‘by his tenacity and vision in preaching one God and Savior, he had preserved from dissolution the unity and integrity of the Christian faith.’”

—*NIDCC*, p. 81

Augustine

A.D. 354-430

Greatest thinker in early church; big influence on Roman Catholic and Protestant theology; marks transition from classical to medieval period

Before being a Christian Augustine was follower of Manicheans, then of Neo-Platonists; influenced by Ambrose to respect Christianity; converted when 32 years old (convicting verses Rom. 13:13-14, "Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."); became bishop of Hippo, near Carthage, and founded Augustinian order

Confessions show how God alone can satisfy the spiritual needs of man, can provide forgiveness and satisfaction in holiness

Writings against Manicheanism replace dualism with God's sovereignty; writings against Pelagius support biblical doctrines of sin, salvation, and God's sovereignty in salvation

Big crisis in Roman empire—barbaric invasions, sack of Rome in 410; shortly after Rome officially Christian under Theodosius in 392; first time in over 700 years; many blame defeat on leaving Roman gods; Augustine's reply, *City of God*; Rome punished for its sins; besides, Rome part of city of man, thus necessarily mixed with evil; city of God (the church) most important; kingdom passages of Bible spiritualized to be the Christian church, invisible and visible; authority of God given to the church

John of Damascus

Fl. ca. A.D. 740

Apologist with the Muslims; wrote *Dialogue Between a Christian and a Saracen*

Anselm of Canterbury

A.D. 1033-1109

Archbishop of Canterbury; great ability; wrote two seminal books; one (*Proslogion*) presented the "ontological argument" for the existence of God; this is regarded as a classic *a priori* proof of God's existence

His other work (*Cur Deus Homo?*) showed the necessity of the Redeemer's being both God and man in order to satisfy divine justice in the substitutionary atonement

Abelard

A.D. 1079-1142

Showed contradictions of church fathers in *Sic et Non (Yes and No)*; also appealed for conversion from Judaism in *Dialogue Between Philosophical Judaism and Christianity*

Peter Lombard

A.D. 1100-1164

Collected writings of fathers under topics in four books of *Sentences*; depended heavily on Augustine; widely used as a text

Roger Bacon

A.D. 1214-1294

Not to be confused with Francis Bacon of the 17th century; did much early work in experimental science, as well as language and philosophy; preferred investigation by experimentation as more reliable than scholastic conclusions; believed in the study of the Bible in the original languages would help understand nature; ahead of his own time (by about three centuries)

Thomas Aquinas

A.D. 1225-1274

Dominican monk; greatest philosopher and theologian of Middle Ages; ultimate exponent of natural theology, based on categories of Aristotle

Produced great work *Summa Theologica* and also *Contra Gentiles*; works requested by missionaries in Spain

Theology organized to prove as much as possible by philosophy (God, creation, providence), with the final book showing the truth of revelation (Trinity, sacraments, incarnation, heaven, hell)

Changed church from being primarily Platonic-Augustinian to being Aristotelian; apologetics more based on empirical observation of nature and deductions from same; Augustinianism revived by Protestant Reformation; teachings of Aquinas now revived by contemporary Thomistic philosophy (we can truly know reality through our experience)

Aquinas criticized the *a priori* methodology of Anselm and others, preferring the *a posteriori* arguments based on experience or evidences of nature; central was his reliance on the principle of causality, pointing to the first, highest, or uncaused Cause as God

Raymond Lull

A.D. 1236-1315

Dedicated missionary to the Muslims in northern Africa; many missionary trips; persecuted; debated with Muslim scholars

First to write extensively about theology in a national language (not only in Latin; wrote also in Catalan and in Arabic)

William of Occam

Ca. A.D. 1280-1349

English Franciscan scholar; summoned to Avignon to answer charges of heresy; became advocate of power of emperor over that of the pope

Opposed realism of Thomists; asserted nominalism (empirical evidence is basis for knowledge; universals are created by reason; only particulars exist; thus no rational proof for God; must be taken by faith); opposed unnecessary assumptions ("Occam's Razor")