



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 31 – Literary and Artistic Accomplishments

While the pope and the emperor and the kings vied with each other for power and influence, there were others who were more interested in theological topics such as the nature of God and the reason God became man in Jesus Christ. One such thinker was Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm was originally from Italy, then he became a monk in France, and finally in 1093 AD he became the archbishop of Canterbury in England. This was the highest religious office in England. Because of disputes with the kings of England, Anselm had to spend much of his time in exile from Canterbury. He used this time to think through various church teachings to gain fuller understanding of them. His most well-known writing is *Why God Human?* (*Cur Deus Homo?*). As a Christian, Anselm of course believed that Jesus was the eternal Son of God and at a definite time in history became a true human being. But in trying to determine why this was necessary for our salvation, Anselm concluded that no mere human being could atone for human sins. The only One who was valuable enough or worthy enough to make satisfaction for all human sin was one who was not only true man but also true God. Surely there is evidence enough in Holy Scripture to show that Anselm's conclusion is correct.

Another thinker was Peter Abelard, who used his intellectual gifts to put down other scholars. This trait created a host of enemies for him. He also angered the uncle of a woman named Heloise. Heloise was his pupil, and he seduced her and had a child with her, even though they were not married. He withdrew to a monastery, but his enemies, including Bernard of Clairvaux, accused him of heresy. His relationship with Heloise continued through correspondence. Before he was reconciled with the church, Abelard wrote a book called *Yes and No* (*Sic et Non*). In this book he discussed various theological questions and pointed out that the Bible and authorities in the church were not in agreement on the answers. Those who followed him tried to resolve some of these disagreements using reason. Abelard died in 1142 AD.

A third thinker was Peter Lombard, who tried to write about Christian doctrine in a systematic way. His book was called *Four Books of Sentences*. This became the basic textbook for teaching theology in the universities that were being developed during this time. Those who taught or wrote about theology generally followed the outlines set forth by Peter Lombard. The two main centers for the study of theology were the University of Oxford in England and the University of Paris in France. One of the methods used for the study of theology in the universities was participation in a disputation. In a disputation, a question was posed, and the student had to try to answer the question by citing various

authorities. The teacher would then respond with his own view and his arguments for his view.

At this time the teaching of the Greek philosopher Aristotle became more influential in theological studies. The Muslim scholar Averroes was the expert on the teaching of Aristotle, and the most important claim of these studies is that reason is superior over all other authorities, including the Bible and the ancient fathers. But Aristotle and Averroes were not Christians, and so their emphasis on reason was not helpful for the understanding of God's Word. For example, the Bible teaches that God created the world out of nothing. But Aristotle and Averroes did not accept the Bible as God's Word, and so they concluded that matter is eternal, not created.

The Franciscan scholar Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274 AD), however, insisted (along with Augustine of Hippo) that God's Word is the final authority, and that faith in God's Word is necessary in order to learn and understand the truth. The views of Augustinian scholars and Aristotelian scholars did not agree with each other. No doubt many debates and discussions were held among the university teachers and students on these very issues.

Two Dominican scholars attempted to use Aristotelian philosophy to gain a better understanding of Christian doctrine. Albert the Great (1193-1280 AD) taught at Paris and Cologne. He made a clear distinction between philosophy and theology. Philosophy is based on reason. Theology is based on revelation. From revelation Albert knew that God created the world out of nothing. But as a philosopher Albert could not prove that God created the world out of nothing.

Albert's most famous student was Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 AD). Thomas' parents tried for over a year to prevent Thomas from becoming a Dominican, but he finally escaped to Cologne to study with Albert. Because he was so quiet, his fellow-students called him "the dumb ox". But eventually he became famous as professor at the University of Paris. He was a prolific writer on philosophical and theological subjects. He believed that reason is able to prove some of the facts of theology. We can know from Scripture that there is a God, and faith believes that without proof. But Thomas Aquinas believed that reason can also prove the existence of God, and he attempted to do that in his writings. He developed five arguments for the existence of God that did not depend on Scripture. His great work in systematic theology is *Summa Theologica*. It is a vast system of argumentation that attempts to prove God's truth through Aristotelian methods.

The greatest error of these scholars who emphasized reason was that they did not understand the damage done to man's reason through original sin, and therefore they did not comprehend the fullness of God's grace.

It was in the age of these thinkers that artists and craftsmen used their talents to create the magnificent cathedrals of Europe. These cathedrals were not intended simply as meeting places or places of learning, but as works of art worthy of the miracles performed by the

priests within their walls. The first cathedrals were built in the Romanesque style, but this was replaced by the Gothic style. Gonzalez writes: “The final outcome of these developments was – and still is – impressive. Stone seems to take flight and rise to heaven. The entire building, inside and out, was a book in which the mysteries of faith and all creation were reflected. Inside, the long naves and slender columns, the multicolored windows, and the play of lights provided a worthy setting for the eucharistic miracle” (Gonzalez: *The Story of Christianity*, Part 1, p. 323).

Because the type of learning and writing of Albert and Aquinas flourished in the schools and universities, it became known as *scholasticism*. Various terms and categories used by Aristotle began to be used in works of theology, and almost invariably this made the study of God’s Word more complicated. Certain questions were asked for which we do not need an answer, such as how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Questions:

1. Why was the incarnation of Christ necessary, according to Anselm?
2. What did Abelard point out in his book *Yes and No*?
3. For what purpose were Lombard’s sentences used for many years?
4. What is a disputation?
5. What did the two famous Dominican theologians attempt to accomplish?
6. Why do we not really need to be able to prove God’s Word by reason?
7. What is characteristic of the great cathedrals of Europe?
8. What danger is there in studying the Bible according to Aristotle’s methods?