CHAPTER ONE

TRADITIONAL SOCIETY: REASON AND DESIRE UNDER WRAPS

GERBERT AND HIS TIMES

‘[N]o institution of human society can remain stable once we have decided to believe in nothing which we cannot grasp with our senses’.¹
-- Saint Augustine, quoted.

Towards the end of the tenth century Gerbert of Aurillac, a brilliant young scholar, was sent to Spain to study the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. When Gerbert crossed the Pyrenees and descended into northern Spain,² he entered what was to him a strange and multicultural intellectual world. It was the first step in an ambitious career that would take Gerbert to the pinnacle of power in the Church. By the close of the first millennium, he had become Pope, calling himself Sylvester II (999–1003). His four-year tenure as head of the Church was brief and tumultuous, made more difficult by charges that he had sold his soul to the devil.

Gerbert was likely born to a poor family in south-central France around 946.³ For a young man from this background, being admitted to formal schooling was unusual, but he so impressed his teachers that he was recommended for higher study. Cathedral schools provided what formal education there was in Europe. The curriculum consisted of the seven liberal arts, adding grammar, logic, and rhetoric (the trivium) to the quadrivium. There were very few texts to study and only a handful of authors whose ideas were acceptable to the Church. The most important of these auctores or authorities was St Augustine. Their wisdom was to be memorized by students and not questioned. Knowledge did not advance; rather, the world was in decline and the celebrated ‘giants’ of philosophy had lived in the past.⁴

In Spain, Gerbert experienced the intellectual liberation that is inspired by cultural diversity. Spain was a crossroads, the meeting place of cultures. Arabic-speaking peoples from North Africa had conquered the entire peninsula by AD 711, part of a tidal wave of conquest that had carried Arabic culture and the religion of Islam from the holy city of Mecca eastward into Persia, north into the Balkans, and west into southern France. By Gerbert’s time, Moors and their Arabic-speaking, Islamic culture were confined to the southern half of Spain.

Ideas cross borders more readily than armies. While Christian teaching had sunk into repetition and dogma, Arabic scholars in Spain had access to a much wider range of knowledge and texts, from Greece, Egypt, Persia, and North Africa, including works of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, that were still unavailable in Europe. The Moslems were in touch with the ancient civilizations of China and India through their extensive trading connections. Muslim

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astronomers, physicians, and mathematicians were far in advance of their Christian counterparts. Hobson argues that Islamic scholars valued human rationality and concluded that all truths, including the scientific and the divine, were to be derived through the application of human reason. The result was an early appreciation of the objective, scientific method and the rapid accumulation of knowledge about the natural world. The challenges of these new ideas filtered into Christian Spain and were imbibed by scholars such as Gerbert. Before long, it would be increasingly difficult to regard the auctores with the absolute reverence that the Church expected.

When Gerbert returned to France, he made a great impression because of his exceptional knowledge of mathematics and science. He used Arabic numbers in place of the clumsy Roman numerals and the Chinese abacus, and introduced decimal calculations, enabling scholars to solve complicated calculations. As the Master of the Cathedral School at Rheims in France, Gerbert acquired a large collection of manuscripts of original works on medicine, philosophy, mathematics, and the natural world.

Gerbert brought back to France not only a new library, but also an independent, inquiring mind. He helped to reinvigorate teaching by emphasizing scientific study and the dialectical form of argument. His ideas were more innovative in science than religion. Gerbert did not directly challenge the teachings of the Church—he was making a career within the embrace of the Roman Church. Certainly, he agreed, only Christians understood the truths of theology, such as the resurrection of Christ and the mystery of the Trinity. But Gerbert realized that the auctores disagreed with each other even within the Christian tradition and were especially contradictory on matters of science and natural philosophy. Rather than blindly accepting the texts of established authorities, he thought it was up to each student to apply reason to the information available and establish what was true by developing an argument, which could be defended with evidence. It was a potentially revolutionary idea. The generation of scholars he inspired to seek truth through rational argument spread the new knowledge and Gerbert’s logical method. Gerbert had no deeper intention than to place Christian doctrine on a more secure foundation. Once unleashed, however, human reason has the capacity to challenge existing knowledge and beliefs.

Gerbert’s reputation for knowledge and his dialectical approach to argument singled him out for suspicion, but it was his dabbling in politics that aroused the ire of his rivals. The idea that religion should be kept separate from politics is modern in origin. In medieval Europe, government and religious power were intricately intertwined, and the Church contested with kings and emperors for secular power. Gerbert became the tutor of the young Holy Roman Emperor, who had become Otto III at the age of three. Otto planned to restore the Empire to its previous glory. To further his ambitions, Otto helped Gerbert become the first non-Italian Pope. But Gerbert’s time at the pinnacle was short and conflictual, due more to the power struggles of medieval politics than theology. When Gerbert’s rivals used his reputation for exotic knowledge against him, they were attempting to undermine Otto III as much as Gerbert himself.

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5 Ibid., 112.
6 John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 177-8. Hobson argues that these ideas diffused into Europe from the Moslem world and are the intellectual origins of the later, European scientific revolution (p. 178).
As the world changes, older ideas become increasingly incongruent with people’s experiences. When Gerbert returned from Spain, he re-entered a more traditional world carrying the seeds of intellectual reawakening. Forces for change were emerging within the traditional social order that, in the long run of history, brought his world to an end. This traditional society can be described by referring to three basic features: economic relations, political power, and ideological control.

POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND IDEOLOGICAL POWER

‘[R]eligious ideas crystallized into superstitions, [is] the most permanent form taken by human thought.’
-- Honoré de Balzac, *The Country Doctor* (1833)

When Gerbert travelled across Christian Europe on his way to become Master of the Cathedral School in Rheims, he passed few large towns and saw little overland trade. Local areas were economically self-sufficient, inward-looking, and seemingly changeless. As novelist, Salman Rushdie said, ‘The distance between cities is always small; a villager, travelling a hundred miles to town, traverses emptier, darker, more terrifying space.’

In Northern Europe, a hereditary status system separated an aristocracy of birth from a class of peasant farmers held in the bonds of serfdom. Between the aristocracy and the serfs was a class of labourers known as yeoman, who were independent peasants having some control over their own small farms. The yeoman were a significant class in England, where they were seen as proud and independent—as Mark Twain suggested (Box 1.1), they were the heart and soul of the nation.

**Box 1.1 Mark Twain: A Nation of Yeoman**

Seven-tenths of the free population of the country were . . . small ‘independent’ farmers, artisans, etc.; which is to say, they were the nation, the actual Nation; they were about all of it that was useful, or worth saving, or really respect-worthy; and to subtract them would have been to subtract the Nation and leave behind some dregs, some refuse, in the shape of a king, nobility, and gentry, idle, unproductive, acquainted mainly with the arts of wasting and destroying, and of no sort of use or value in any rationally constructed world. And yet, by ingenious contrivance this gilded minority, instead of being in the tail of the procession where it belonged, was marching, head up and banners flying, at the other end of it; had elected itself to be the Nation, and these innumerable claims had permitted it so long that they had come at last to accept it as a truth; and not only that, but to believe it right and as it should be. The priests had told their fathers and themselves that this ironical state of things was ordained of God. . . .

—Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889)

These unequal groups were not so much classes in a modern sense, but estates—social categories into which people were born and remained for their lifetime. There was very little social mobility. People were seldom able to rise from lower to higher estates, stories of princes marrying commoners such as Cinderella to the contrary, although exemplary service during war might lead to a knighthood. The Church was a second avenue for upward mobility. Gerbert had achieved a considerable rise in his private fortune through his intellectual service to both Church and state.

Gerbert did not have the advantages of birth that feudal society reserved for the aristocracy. He lived his own Cinderella story, partly through his intellect but ultimately through his connection to secular power. Gerbert, as Pope Sylvester II, had been placed in office by the power of the Holy Roman Emperor, but the papacy had not yet achieved a dominant position as the single, authoritative voice inside the Church. During the eleventh century, and especially under Pope Gregory II (1073–85), the Roman Church was transformed into an autonomous and dominant institution under the rule of a single theological monarch. By the time of Pope Innocent III (1198–1216), the Pope had been elevated to the position of uncontested authority over the Church.

Despite the stability of status positions, everyday life was unstable because political and military power within the feudal system was decentralized among a variety of titled aristocrats who vied with each other and with the monarch for wealth, power, and prestige. The Crusades brought a semblance of unity to European feudalism, focusing the ambitions of the titled on the acquisition of wealth from the Holy lands.

Christian Europe initially set its sights on the wealth of the eastern Mediterranean. As Europe aroused itself from what later became known as its Dark Age, the sword of conflict between Christianity and Islam was transferred to European hands. European kings and the Roman Church colluded with European monarchs to achieve military domination over its great cultural and economic rival. This time the Christians wore the armour of the aggressor, invading the Middle East in a series of invasions known as the Crusades that were intended to wrest control of the land, riches, and trading routes of the Middle East from the Islamic ‘infidels’.

While the military accomplishments of this European aggression were short-lived, the economic and intellectual changes that came in its wake were irreversible. Surviving Crusaders came back into Europe with several kinds of booty. The great wealth they had plundered—which came more from the Eastern Christians at Constantinople than from the Moslems of the Holy Land—raised the status and power of the bankers and merchants in the Italian cities who had financed and supplied the Crusaders. The Italians became the great commercial capitalists, traders, and adventurers of the period.

Ideologically, the Roman Catholic Church was constructed as a powerful and centralized bureaucracy that defined doctrine for all of Western Europe. As power was consolidated in Rome, diversity of views within the One True Church had to be stamped out as representing alien forms of heresy. Over time, there was much to be fought within the boundaries of theology. Nevertheless, the cornerstone of a more profound social critique had been laid by scholars such as Gerbert, who emphasized the capacity of human reason to achieve knowledge through its own powers.

What in Gerbert’s time had been an uncertain trickle of foreign knowledge seeping into Christian Europe became a wide river by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as returning Crusaders brought with them an intellectual booty more profound than gold. The natural philosophy of the Greeks had been preserved for more than 1,000 years in the Middle East and had been extensively studied, translated, and commented upon by Arabic scholars. A flood of translations of the works of such ancient figures as Aristotle previously unavailable in Europe
came into the eager hands of the new masters. They learned the astronomy of Ptolemy, the mathematics of Euclid, and the medicine of Hippocrates. The Crusaders had expected to eliminate a foreign ‘heresy’. Ironically, they succeeded in inspiring more dangerous heretical ideas than those they were designed to suppress. European scholars rediscovered the intellectual heritage of ancient Greece and gained a share of the accumulated knowledge Moslems had acquired over the centuries that Europe had remained isolated and inward-looking.

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Europe had begun to experience a wide intellectual Renaissance known as the ‘new logic’. Outside the existing cathedral schools, a peripatetic breed of masters emerged, modelled after the ancient Greek philosophers. They moved from place to place, teaching avid students by the use of dialectics. Among the first major scholars and teachers who helped spread this new scholarship was Abelard.

**ABELARD, HÉLOÏSE, AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

Pierre Abelard (1079–1142) was a twelfth-century ‘original thinker’ who was remembered in the nineteenth century primarily as the lover of Héloïse, a brilliant young woman he was hired to tutor. Unlike Gerbert a century earlier, Abelard was downwardly mobile, being born into a knighthood but choosing the life of a scholar. Abelard had an egotistical and quarrelsome personality, although he was reputed to be a popular teacher because he was ‘controversial, arrogant, [and] charismatic’. He preferred the rational philosophy of Aristotle to the dogma of St Augustine and his lectures were regarded as skeptical and rationalistic. In a book called *Sic at Non (Yes and No)*, Abelard posed 158 questions and then answered them in conflicting ways from Scripture and the medieval ‘authorities’ (*auctores*). According to Abelard, ‘The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning. . . . For by doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we arrive at the truth.’ Sociologist, Emile Durkheim called Abelard ‘one of the most prestigious … personalities of the whole Middle Ages.’ His reputation and fame were unequalled.

One of Abelard’s works consists of a debate between a Christian and a philosopher about the nature of goodness. The argument does not represent the traditional distinction between reason (philosophy) and faith (Christianity), and neither of the disputants relies on the authority of texts. Instead, reason and logic are the only weapons and the disputants employ only rational arguments. The Roman Church declared some of Abelard’s books heretical, and ordered them to be burned. Condemned for heresy again in 1140, Abelard was compelled to take refuge in the monastery at Cluny, where he spent his last years. Abelard was not contesting religion; he was challenging specific beliefs on the grounds of reason, a path that led to secular rather than religious conclusions.

The Romantic Era (the early 1800s) remembered Abelard not as a theorist, but as a lover.

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18 Marenbon, *Mediaeval Philosophy*, p. 158. Marenbon notes that the Christian was ‘more perceptive and logically acute’ in the debate (p. 158).
While in his forties, Abelard became romantically obsessed with Héloïse, a brilliant 17-year-old Parisian woman who could read Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. With seduction in mind, Abelard offered to tutor Héloïse and moved into the house where she lived with her Uncle, Fulbert, who was unaware that ‘he had entrusted a tender lamb to the care of a ravenous wolf.’ Soon, according to Abelard’s written confession, ‘love drew our eyes together far more than the lesson drew them to the pages of our text.’ To avert Fulbert’s suspicion, he sometimes struck his lover: ‘there were . . . sometimes blows’, he wrote. There was much to be suspicious about. According to Abelard, ‘No degree in love’s progress was left untried by our passion, and if love itself could imagine any wonder as yet unknown, we discovered it.’

This illicit liaison produced the expected result: Héloïse gave birth to a son, who was named Astrolabius after a scientific instrument used in navigation. Abelard agreed to marry Héloïse, but only in secret in order to preserve his teaching post. Romantically, Héloïse argued against marriage because the two should be tied ‘only by disinterested love freely given’, what Héloïse called the ‘chastity of spirit’. She gave in, however, and after the pair were married secretly Abelard enrolled Héloïse in a convent. Furious over the affair, over Abelard’s confession that he had planned the seduction, and over the marriage, Héloïse’s guardian, Fulbert, conspired to have Abelard attacked. The thugs he hired extracted revenge by cutting off Abelard’s testicles.

Like Héloïse in her convent, Abelard ended his life in a monastery. The two continued to correspond. Abelard resumed his publication of sometimes heretical ideas while Héloïse put her many talents into founding religious houses. For the later Romantics, the tale of the lovers’ romance exemplified the tragedy of love. In 1817, the bodies of Abelard and Héloïse were re-buried in a single tomb in Paris.

Héloïse was more the exception than the rule in her learning. Generally speaking, the prevailing view in the Middle Ages accorded women low status, although Christian women were restricted less than their Moslem or Jewish counterparts. The daughters of wealthy burghers and gentlefolk received some education in convents or from private tutors, as had Héloïse, although the training was often ornamental. Although one of the major poets of the age was Mary of France, the dominant social institutions of the day, feudalism and the Church, tightly constricted the potential of women.

Much of the traditional thinking of the time could be traced back to the age of Aristotle. Aristotle had believed that biological males were the normal human being and that women were imperfect men, errors of nature. The organs of both genders were the same, but women’s were hidden inside their bodies. Consequently, women were naturally passive and occupied a lower social status than men. Similar ideas have stubbornly persisted throughout social history, surfacing in one guise or another to the present day. Male writers in the medieval period complained that it was a waste of time to educate women who would spend their lives in domestic duties. What was worse from the male point of view was that ‘learning inclined women toward insubordination.’

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22 Hawkins, *A Sketch of Medieval Philosophy*, 47.
24 Ibid.
27 Mundy, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, 209.
Christine de Pisan (c. 1364–c. 1431) was one of these insubordinate women. Widowed at the age of 25, de Pisan had the responsibilities of a head of a household thrust upon her. During the next decade and a half, she read widely and became self-educated. As described by historian, Mulder-Bakker, de Pisan recounted a dream in her *Book of Fortune’s Transformation*, through which she felt ‘completely transformed’. In de Pisan’s words: ‘I felt I had become a true man’. Widowed in her forties, de Pisan was able to transcend the limitations of her gender, which were tied to marriage and child-bearing, and be taken seriously as a theoretical writer.  

Both practically and intellectually, she acted the masculine role, and used poetry to critique the treatment of women. She demonstrated the self-serving desires that under girded the formula of male chivalry.  

One of the first professional woman writers, in the *Cité des Dames* de Pisan imagined a community of independent women. She disproved the inferiority of women by situating in her city the most accomplished women, including some of her contemporaries. This work is a direct refutation of the disparaging misogynist literature produced by men. De Pisan reflected a distinctly feminine standpoint by opposing the warfare that was nearly continuous during her lifetime. Her world view, shaped by the horrors of the Hundred Years War, as McDonald notes, de-glorified warfare and was rooted in domesticity, in the bonds of motherhood and family that she saw being destroyed by civil war. She spoke on behalf of the widows and of those deprived of kin, appealing to the Queen, herself a mother, to exert her public influence in the interests of peace. There was no glory or honour in a civil war, de Pisan said, and no real victory. There was only death to your own kin, destruction of your homes, and devastating famine. Appealing to the self-interest of the powerful, she argued that civil war would inspire the people to revolt because they ‘have been too often robbed, deprived and oppressed’, forced to pay outrageous taxes, and ‘had their food stolen by soldiers’. French women were not powerless in their efforts to bring peace, de Pisan counselled. They should imitate the actions of the legendary Sabine women who threw themselves ‘with hair dishevelled into the battlefield’, their children in their arms, shouting: ‘‘Have pity on our dear loved ones! Make peace!’’.  

This sentiment represented the voice of the most obvious victims of war. De Pisan was exceptional not in her viewpoint but in having the opportunity to present her arguments publicly. The main source of autonomy for an aristocratic woman in the Middle Ages was to gain control of a nunnery, such as that founded by Héloïse. Women in medieval society also found a more mystical means to exercise power. In an age when knowledge was thought to derive from revelation, women could claim to be visionaries, mystically-chosen prophets of the word of God. While any claim to revealed knowledge was controversial, Church authorities, who otherwise refused to ordain women as priests, had to take prophets seriously.  

Secular women who occupied positions of authority were also able to transgress the usual restrictions imposed on their gender. Some were able to exercise influence over their sons who

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31 Kay et al., *Short History of French Literature*, 84.
33 Quoted ibid., 11–12.
inherited positions of power in their youth. When their husbands were absent, upper-class women managed their estates. Historically, the status of women of all classes varied according to time and space, within the limits of patriarchal power. In the special circumstances following the Black Death, for example, male-dominated occupations were open to women and they had greater freedom from traditional restraints. While the actual conditions of women’s life and work varied over the centuries, the ideology of subordination was consistently defended throughout the Middle Ages.  

Although women’s legal and civil rights were generally circumscribed in the Middle Ages, there were some exceptions and the boundary between public and private spheres was permeable. Lower- and middle-class women frequently worked in the family business or independently. Some crafts, by definition, were women’s domain; in addition, many widows acquired the control of their husbands’ craft and, simultaneously, their citizenship rights. As the urban economy grew in the later Middle Ages, women were integrated more fully into the economic life of the towns. The Wife of Bath in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* possessed civil rights equal to men.

The status of women, however, was susceptible to changes wrought by the power of patriarchy. As craft guilds monopolized trades, women were confined to gender-specific work in the home. Inheritance laws discriminated against wives, so widows often suffered severe poverty and, at worst, were forced into prostitution. At the bottom of the social scale, peasant women married relatively young and were under the customary authority of their husbands. Their only hope for escape from a life of complete subordination, Rowbotham claims, was to join the band of whores who followed behind the armies—though this is hardly a model of female liberation.

**Box 1.2 Shakespeare on Women’s Sensibility**

*Emilia:* Let husbands know  
Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell  
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,  
As husbands have. What is it that they do  
When they change us for others? Is it sport?  
I think it is: and doth affection breed it?  
I think it doth: is’t frailty that thus errs?  
It is so too: and have not we affections,  
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?  
Then let them use us well: else let them know,  
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.  

Nothing symbolizes medieval patriarchal authority more succinctly than the locking up of women’s sexuality by the chastity belt, forced on some wives by men before setting off on the

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Crusades. This cruel, iron body cage, along with the powers of legal marriage, ensured that property was inherited by children born legitimately. It also implied that men were never secure in their control over women and that resistance could take many forms. Shakespeare had an inkling of women’s sexual appetites, as Desdemona’s maidservant, Emilia, explained in *Othello* (Box 1.2). Middle-class men, such as independent peasant landowners and town merchants, were also concerned with controlling women. In some jurisdictions, Mundy observes, town officials established houses of prostitution. In this way, he claims, the middle class ‘took seriously [St] Augustine’s celebrated observation that whores were necessary lest men fall into even worse vices’.

Ultimately, the reality of gender inequality was rooted in the absence of control over child-bearing and the social institutions of religious and secular society that buttressed the patriarchal family. While the Hebrew Old Testament has been interpreted by many contemporary feminists as unrelentingly patriarchal and androcentric, strong women appear in extra-biblical literature. One is Judith, a pious widow who plays the harlot to gain entrance to the tent of Holofernes, the Assyrian general, and then decapitates him. In the early years of Christianity, women were not denied a voice, and women in the New Testament are shown in a variety of social roles. The status of women changed with the institutionalization of Christianity, especially through the doctrinal and organizational work of Saint Paul. The Christian image of women as it was constructed through the Middle Ages was distinctly bipolar, either represented by the evil seductress, Eve, or by the pure and chaste Madonna, the Virgin Mary.

There was an ideal of equality between men and women, Mundy suggests, in the medieval love literature, which derived originally from Moslem Spain and incited the passions with legends of love, adventure, and chivalry. The courtly love rituals of southern France, in which women were idealized as virtuous and were worshipped from afar on pedestals of poetry and song, elevated the perception of women as ornamental property and reduced their brutalization. For Rowbotham, however, courtly love was little more than an elaborate ritual that masked women’s real powerlessness. Aristocratic women accepted the security that their position offered them and did not rebel against the ever tighter constraint of patriarchy. The dilemma of occupying a somewhat comfortable and privileged yet ultimately restricted and disrespected position haunts the subsequent efforts of upper- and middle-class women over many centuries to achieve independence and equality.

43 Humbert of Romans, quoted Mundy, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, 221. As this argument was put by a Venetian professor in the film, *Casanova* (2005), ‘On the higher plane of science and philosophy, women serve only to distract us [men], to bring us down to our earthly appetites. So I say: No woman shall ever set foot in this University.’ (Directed by Lasse Hallström, screenplay by Jeffrey Hatcher and Kimberly Simi.)
44 In this sense, the image of the contemporary singer Madonna is, intentionally, highly ironic.
45 Mundy, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, 211.
THE INTELLECTUAL REVOLUTION

‘There’s nothing we can do. It’s always been this way. Before me, before you, before the ones who came before you. Back and back and back.’


In the eleventh century, it is likely that people perceived their received traditions the way Lois Lowry described it in her dystopian novel of a future, planned and bland society.\(^4^8\) Medieval universities, however, preserved intact the importance of reason in disputations about even theological questions.

As students assembled around popular scholars, paying them directly for their teaching, independent bodies of teachers organized in guilds to establish universities and protect their independence. Abelard was a leading intellectual figure at the University of Paris. Other universities were founded, for example, in Oxford and Cambridge, as well as Bologna and Padua in Italy. In Bologna, students were free to elect their own teachers. Paris developed the model curriculum, established around logic, followed by theology, law, and medicine. Degrees were introduced to indicate the stage of scholarship achieved, and masters from any university were eligible to teach at any other.\(^4^9\) The early universities were still largely theological. All learning was linked to religion, including the study of nature. Even then, however, universities provided a refuge for radical thought. There were different versions of Christianity, departing in small or large ways from the official dogma of Rome, and these views were debated and even propagated by some teachers in the universities.

More dangerous to the Roman Church than other religions, such as Islam and Judaism, were deviations of doctrine that arose within Christianity to challenge its established dogmas. Heresies usually originated in other religions and the number and importance of these new doctrines were proliferating in the twelfth century as new ideas poured into Europe. The ironically named Pope Innocent III launched a ‘crusade’ in 1209 against the Albigensian heresy in Languedoc, in southwestern France, drowning this challenge to papal authority in blood and destruction. The Albigensians practised a religion according to which the material world, including the Catholic Church, represented the forces of evil. When the papal armies battered their way into Languedoc, according to later legends, they wondered how to avoid killing Catholics and slaughter only Albigensain heretics, since the two were indistinguishable by race or language. The papal representative reportedly said, ‘Kill them all, the Lord will know his own.’\(^5^0\)

Military conquest and massacre were one way to re-establish Church dominance. The Church devised a second, more institutional, strategy in the thirteenth century by establishing two new orders of friars, the Dominicans (founded by the Spanish priest, St Dominic, in 1215) and the Franciscans (founded by the Italian St Francis of Assisi in 1209). They were charged with the task of identifying heretics and bringing them back into the Church if possible or, if necessary, persecuting them. These new orders proved to be a two-edged sword for the Church. Some of the radical followers of Francis of Assisi argued that Christ had been a poor carpenter and, to follow in his footsteps, they took vows of poverty. They lived simply and helped the


\(^{50}\) Claster, *The Medieval Experience*, 338.
poor. Meanwhile, the Roman Church was becoming increasingly wealthy and even opulent. The Franciscan doctrine of Christ’s poverty would later be condemned in 1323 by Pope John XXII. The Church subsequently rewrote the early life of St Francis to ‘tone down’ his potentially radical social views.51 More ominously, the Roman Church established the infamous Inquisition to identify, torture, and execute heretics and others whose ideas were deemed dangerous.

The operation of the Inquisition paralleled the introduction of the new heresy of reason. The rediscovery of previously unknown works by classical authors such as Aristotle and access to the wide scholarship possessed by the Islamic world wrought a revolution in traditional social theory. An alternative, self-contained system of knowledge, pre-Christian in origin and created in a pagan culture without the benefit of God’s revelation, became available to scholars. The contrast between the two systems of knowledge was considerable. For Aristotle, the universe was infinite, not newly created; humans were creatures like any others, not possessed of immortal souls; God or the Gods were completely inaccessible and unconcerned about the world, rather than actively intervening in its workings.

According to the dominant Christian theology, since Adam, the first human male, was made in God’s image, God was masculine. He had revealed truth to humans through the Bible or by speaking directly to people, the only two sources of absolute truth. Knowledge was through ‘revelation’—the view that God had allowed portions of his absolute wisdom to become known to human beings. Christian doctrine taught that the earth was newly created; that humans possessed immortal souls and would have life after death in either heaven or hell; that God was all-knowing and all-powerful, and performed great miracles in the world and small ones when he directly answered prayers.

God had given people the ability to think so they could freely choose to be good and to worship God. Otherwise, the ability to reason that every individual possessed was a dangerous thing. At its most extreme, a form of atheism emerged that sought to replace all religious beliefs with truths determined solely by human reason. Reason was dangerous because humans could be tempted into evil, even into doubt about the truths of the Christian religion. In the 1600s, John Locke, an English philosopher, argued that teaching the acceptance of dogmatic ‘traths’ on faith rather than reason afforded the doctors of doctrine a monopoly of knowledge.52

When men have found some general propositions that could not be doubted … it eased the lazy from the pains of search, and stopped the inquiry of the doubtful…. And it was of no small advantage to those who affected to be masters and teachers, to make this the principle of principles, “that principles must not be questioned.” for once having established this tenet … it put their followers upon a necessity of receiving some doctrines as such; which was to take them off from the use of their own reason and judgment, and put them on believing and taking them upon trust without further examination: in which posture of blind credulity they might be more easily governed by and made useful to some sort of men who had the skill and office to principle and guide them. Nor is it a small power it gives one man over another to have the authority to be the dictator of principles and teacher of unquestionable truths; and to make a man swallow that …, which may serve to his purpose who teacheth them.
-- John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689)

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