CHRISTIAN HISTORY

1301-1400 C.E.

June 24, 2026

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: The rise in Europe of education and long-distance trade and communication led to urbanization, centralization of power in nation-states, growth of the middle class, cultural enrichment, individualism, and a decline in perceived authority of the Roman Catholic Church. The Black Death sparked turmoil across Europe. Movements toward reform, growing out of desires for reform in the 1200s, continued to strengthen. The Bible regained esteem as the guide for Christian faith and life. Corruption continued in the papacy and church leadership, and stronger kings and populaces pushed back against what they saw as intrusive or untrustworthy church leaders.

Key Questions: Will Europe survive the Black Death? Will the papacy serve France? Will the Roman Catholic Church survive having two popes competing at the same time? Which has more authority for the Christian: the church or the Bible? What is the best way to connect with God: through the intellect and study, or through the heart, the emotions, and profound spiritual experiences?

Key Dates:
1309-1377 — The "Babylonian Captivity" of the Papacy
1337-1475 — The Hundred-Years' War between France and England
1346-1353 — the Black Death (bubonic plague) spreads across Europe
1350 — approximate beginning of the Renaissance in Europe
1378-1417 — The Great Schism of the Catholic Church
1382-84 — Wycliffe's translation of the Bible into English, the first ever, is completed

Key Places: France, the nation with the most influence over the popes in this century • **Rome,** neglected by the popes for decades, then restored to power • **England,** from where new ideas against church authority and in favor of biblical authority arose, and where the Bible was translated into the people's language

Key People: Pope Boniface VIII (ca. 1234-1303), in whose time the papacy largely lost its ability to control kings and rulers • Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-1327), German Christian mystic whose teachings spurred many toward greater contemplation of the majesty of God • John Wycliffe (ca. 1329-1384), English theologian who denounced the corruption and authority of the Roman Catholic Church and brought about the first translation of the Bible into English

1) MAJOR SOCIETAL CHANGES AND EVENTS

• THE BLACK DEATH — The bubonic plague swept across Europe around 1346-1353 (worst around 1348-1349), killing perhaps a third of the population of Europe. *See "The Black Death" below.*

• NATION-STATES developed as widespread trade increased and in turn sparked growth in banking, credit, and manufacturing. Petty wars among feudal lords and nobles threatened and decreased trade, so the middle class began to support centralized government, which could provide a national army to protect trade and stop the nobles from fighting each other. This centralization also encouraged a sense of national identity, and national identity decreased allegiance to the Roman Catholic pope as the universal authority.

- THE RENAISSANCE occurred in 1350-1650 in Europe. In the Middle Ages, religion had been the center of life, and life was primarily communal. As the middle class prospered and grew, though, communalism was replaced by individualism and pursuit of comforts and pleasures displaced a focus on spirituality. This Renaissance (renewal of culture) began in Italy, because of its prime location for conducting trade between Europe and the Near East. Finances sufficient to provide leisure time allowed the middle class to study more, particularly the classics, and the wealthy financed great artists. Classical Greek writings were rediscovered and moved the upper classes to focus on the priorities of that past, glorious time; the here and now, not eternity; and enjoyment of life, not devotion to God in pursuit of a life to come. Religion became more formalized and less spiritual. Even the popes of this era became more interested in study of literature and art than in the study of spiritual matters. All people were religious, but religion and daily life began to be considered as separate categories.

2) SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

- THE BALTICS (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) were the last part of Europe to adopt Christianity, and the Lithuanians were the last of the Baltic peoples to do so. Christians there fled persecution until 1333.
- MISSION WORK — Both Dominicans and Franciscans sent many missionaries to all parts of the world. Franciscan hospitals cared for the sick and met spiritual needs as well. Almost ten thousand friars died providing care to the people during the Black Death of 1348 and 1349.

3) RUSSIAN CHRISTIANITY

- MONGOL INVADERS came into Russia in 1237 and controlled it until 1480. During the 1200s-1300s, Russians identified more strongly with their own nation and culture over against the Mongols, including identifying more strongly with the Russian Orthodox Church.
- In 1325, the Archbishop of Russia moved his headquarters from Kiev to MOSCOW. There he became more independent of the influence of Constantinople, but was in turn more controlled by Russian rulers.
- THE NOVGOROD CRUSADE (1295-1378) took place mostly in the mid-1300s. Swedish forces attacked areas east of Estonia and Lithuania, supposedly to prove to the Russians (who were already Orthodox Christians) whose faith was better. Actually, the crusaders' goals were political and territorial; even so, the popes supported their efforts at Latin-Christian expansion. To the Russians, the battle was a test of Russian patriotism and a conflict between the forces of Roman Catholicism and of Russian Orthodoxy (which was mostly independent of Byzantine Orthodoxy by this time). The Swedes were unsuccessful.

4) CHRISTIANS VERSUS JEWS

- In Western Europe, prejudice toward and mistreatment of Jews was increasing, pushing Jews toward Eastern Europe, where they fled for safety and peace. In some places, building of synagogues was restricted and Jews were punished for reconversion to Judaism, for a Jewish man having sexual relations with a Christian woman, or for a Jew owning Christian slaves.
- In 1328, Jews were massacred by Christians in Navarre (a kingdom between today's Spain and France).
- During the Black Death (bubonic plague) of about 1347-1353, Christians sometimes slaughtered Jews, whom they blamed for the pandemic. *See "The Black Death" below.*
- In 1391, there were fanatical anti-Jewish riots in the Christian parts of Spain.

> *The story does not speak too well for Christianity in the West. Too few Christians stood ready to protect the rights of other human beings. The final consequence of the buildup of centuries of hatred became evident in Nazi Germany.* E. Glenn Hinson, The Church Triumphant: A History of Christianity up to 1300, page 449

5) SHIFT IN THE BALANCE OF POWER

- POPE BONIFACE VIII (lived ca. 1234-1303, pope 1294-1303) failed to bring peace between France and England, which were fighting. The kings of both lands, to raise funds for their war, taxed the clergy. In the late 1290s, the pope prohibited kings from taxing the clergy. Philip the Fair, king of France, responded by prohibiting the export of gold and silver outside France without a royal permit, cutting off the sending of any funds to Rome. Pope Boniface backed off, but tensions between the two flared up again in 1301 over whether the pope could command secular rulers. In 1302, the pope again asserted that the church's spiritual authority overruled the state's political authority. Philip defied him, and the French parliament and people backed their king and accused the pope of various crimes. In 1303, the French arrested Pope Boniface. Boniface was released with help from the common people, but he died about a month later. With this confrontation, the age of papal supremacy over political rulers came to an end.
- WILLIAM OF OCKHAM (or Occam; ca. 1287-1347) is best known for originating what we now call Ockham's Razor: the principle that the best explanation is the one that is simplest, fits all the data, and makes the fewest assumptions. He studied at Oxford 1310-1318, then lectured & taught afterward. He wrote numerous treatises against the papacy and even declared some papal decrees heretical. He believed the role of the individual was more important than the role of the institution; that belief undermined the authority of the church a bit. He had to flee to Bavaria to escape punishment from the church and was protected there by Holy Roman Emperor Louis IV until Ockham died in 1347.
- NATION-STATES, solidifying and developing a strong national identity, resisted the idea of the universal supremacy of the pope. Kings provided armies and security for the middle class so they could do business, and the middle class in turn paid taxes to support the king for his work of protecting them.
- PAPAL TAXES frustrated rulers and people alike, especially in the growing middle class, and particularly in England and France, which developed into nation-states earliest.
  - Papal income at this time came from:
    - income from the papal estates
    - tithes given by the faithful
    - annates (church officials' first-year's salary, given to the pope)
    - local payment of the pope's traveling expenses when he was in their area
    - personal property of higher clergy went to the pope when they died
    - "Peter's pence", originally a mandatory land tax paid directly to the pope (now paid voluntarily)
    - income from vacant church offices
    - various fees

> *Between 1309 and 1439 the Roman church sank to a new low in the estimation of the laity… Many priests [required to be celibate] took concubines or indulged in illicit love affairs with the women in their congregations. Some had the problem of caring for children that were born to these unions and gave more attention to that problem than they did to their clerical duties. Others, especially during the Renaissance, enjoyed luxurious living. Feudalism was still a problem because the dual allegiance to the pope and the feudal lord created a division of interest in many cases. The cleric often gave more attention to his secular responsibilities than he did to his spiritual responsibilities.* Earle E. Cairns, Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church, page 239

6) THE "BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY" (1309-1377)

- In 1305, the French government manipulated the selection of the new pope so that a French pope, Clement V (1305-1314), was chosen. In 1305, under the influence of the king of France, Clement moved to France, and in 1309 he moved the papal seat from Rome to Avignon, on the eastern border of French territory at the time.

- To those outside France, this move appeared to make the pope a puppet of the king of France. This situation particularly angered England and its allies (Germany, etc.), especially when the Hundred-Years' War (1337-1475) with France and its allies (Scotland, etc.) began. Resentment toward the popes grew in England and among its allies.
- During this time, with France holding tremendous influence over the popes, French King Philip IV (Philip the Fair, 1285-1314) came to view the vast wealth and influence of the Knights Templar as a barrier to his centralization of power. He also desired their wealth for his treasury. He had all the Templars in France arrested on the charge of various crimes, then had some of them tortured until they confessed to those crimes. The pope took the king's side against the Templars and ordered all the Templars outside France arrested, too. Accusations persisted, some rose up to defend the templars, and eventually the pope dissolved the group. Much of their wealth did end up in French control. Many Templars spent the rest of their lives in prison; others, who denied the charges against them, were burned alive.
- Many types of corruption plagued the papacy at this time: simony (the buying and selling of positions of power), promoting vacancies in church offices so the papacy could claim the income from those offices for a year or more, permitting church officers to hold several posts at once for greater income (to the extent that they could not cover all those functions), and nepotism (appointing relatives to office). Such corruption caused calls for papal reform and church reform to increase.
- Pope Urban V (1362-1370) tried to move the papal court back to Rome, and he did in 1365—but there was so much disorder in Italy at the time that he soon had to return to Avignon.
- Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) successfully returned the papal seat to Rome on January 17, 1377, ending the "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy.

7) THE GREAT SCHISM (1378-1417)

- Gregory XI, who returned the papacy to Rome, died in 1378. The cardinals elected Urban VI as pope, but though he began intensive work to reform the church, he was so arrogant and bad-tempered that the same cardinals rejected him and elected Clement VII the same year (1378). Urban did not step down, though—so two men, elected by the same cardinals, claimed to be the legitimate pope.
- Clement VII assembled an armed force and attacked Rome, but could not take it, so he moved to Avignon. Urban stayed in Rome. Roman Catholic Europe had to decide which pope to follow. Northern Italy, most of Germany, Scandinavia, and England followed the Roman pope (Urban VI). France, Spain, Scotland, and southern Italy followed the pope at Avignon (Clement VII). (Notice how these groupings reflect the alliances of the Hundred-Years' War, which was going on at this time.)
- When Urban and Clement died, other rival popes followed them, and the schism continued into the 1400s, bringing the papacy into further disrepute.

8) THE BLACK DEATH

- Around 1346, the bubonic plague arrived in Europe from central Asia, where it had originated. It was worst in 1348-1349, taking the lives of over a third of the population in some cities and possibly about a third of the entire population of Europe (estimates range from 25 to 50 million dead).
- When the Plague struck, many believed it was divine punishment for the popes living away from Rome.
- The plague was transmitted by fleas, and fleas were transported by rats, often on ships, so that the plague quickly spread all across Europe. It caused political turmoil, riots, economic disruption, decrease in trade, and unemployment in places where more people survived. It also caused many people to become more superstitious, so that they chased after Christian relics that might protect them.

- After the initial plague wound down around 1353, it returned every 10-12 years for a while. It harmed the young the most, because they lacked adults' immunity against it.
- Throughout the plague, fear was everywhere. In many places, Christians attacked and massacred Jews because it appeared that fewer Jews died of the Plague. The Christians' theory was that Jews were poisoning Christians' wells. Actually, it is thought today that Jews were less affected by the plague because they had more cats, which limited the rat population in their parts of the cities; Christians associated cats with witchcraft.

9) THE RISE OF MYSTICISM

- CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM in the 1300s was basically a movement to reconnect with God emotionally and experientially. It was largely a reaction to the rising scholasticism of the era, with its emphasis on the cognitive. It was also a reaction to the corruption of the church (the Babylonian Captivity, the Great Schism, corruption, etc.), which moved people to want to bypass church leadership and commune directly with God in a way that the dry ritualism of the time did not facilitate. And it was a response to the Black Death, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in London, and other disruptions of normal life.
- CATHERINE OF SIENA (1347-1380), from Italy, claimed that God spoke to her in visions. On the basis of these visions, she opposed sin in the church and even in the papacy. She also persuaded Pope Gregory XI to move the papal court from Avignon back to Rome in 1377.
- MEISTER ECKHART (Eckhart von Hochheim, ca. 1260-1327), of Germany, was the greatest of the German mystics of this era. He focused on contemplation of God, the unreachable Divine One. He emphasized the need for the soul to find union with the divine essence through an ecstatic experience. He also emphasized the need for Christians to demonstrate their union with God through Christian service. He believed one can never find words that truly and fully describe God, for God is entirely beyond the reach of human language and comprehension. He said things like, "If I say, 'God is good,' that is not true. I am good. God is not." He was not trying to express any irreverence toward God, but that God is far beyond "good". His wording often caused him to be misunderstood, and he was accused and convicted of heresy, especially of pantheism (teaching that God is everything and everything is God).
- JOHN TAULER (ca. 1300-1361), from the Holy Roman Empire, emphasized an inward experience of God being more vital for the soul than external ceremonies.
- THE FLAGELLANTS first appeared in 1260, but were most prominent in the 1300s. Thousands of Christians, believing the end was near or that God would destroy the world if humanity did not repent, lashed themselves bloody as penance, as a sort of "second baptism" to demonstrate their repentance. They committed to the flagellant movement for 33½ days, submitting to their superiors and flogging themselves publicly (while singing and listening to a sermon) twice a day, plus once a day in private. Then, after their 33½ days ended, they committed to whipping themselves every year on Good Friday.
- ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

  Advantages:

  - emphasized each individual's own relationship with God
  - provided the personal approach to Christianity that became a hallmark of the Reformation
  - Balance between the intellect and emotion was possible: The Brethren of the Common Life, a mystically-oriented group, emphasized scholarship alongside devotion and set up schools to train both monks and lay persons.
  - Pursuit of a personal relationship with God gradually diminished the role of church authorities as the lay person's only link to Christ, God, and salvation.

  Disadvantages:

  - could rely on subjective inner experience at the expense of the Bible and sound biblical teaching
  - could be too passive in its introspection and its antisocial, privatizing elements

10) RISE OF CONCERN FOR BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

- WILLIAM OF OCKHAM (ca. 1285-1347) argued that the truths of the faith cannot be proved rationally and must be accepted on the authority of the Bible.
- JOHN WYCLIFFE (ca. 1329-1384), an Englishman, studied and taught theology at Oxford most of his life. He was renowned for his logic, and also for his absolute lack of a sense of humor. He became popular among the English nobility for his criticism of the popes and his argument that the people and state should not pay taxes to a corrupt church. He thought any church authority that collected taxes for itself was thereby serving itself, when Jesus had come not to be served but to serve—and so any such church authority was illegitimate. He had so much support in England that, for a long time, the Roman hierarchy could not touch him.

  - He wanted to reform the Roman Catholic Church by getting rid of immoral clergy and ridding it of ownership of property, which he believed leads to corruption.
  - In 1379, he began to argue that Christ, not the pope, is the head of the church.
  - He argued that the Bible, not the church, is the sole authority for believers. He also argued that the church should model itself after the pattern in the New Testament.
  - Wycliffe said "no man is so rude a scholar but that he might learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity."
  - In 1382, Wycliffe renounced the doctrine of transubstantiation, saying the elements do not become the body and blood of Jesus, but that Christ is always spiritually present in the Lord's Supper and is received by faith. This meant the priest could no longer withhold salvation from a person by withholding Communion. Wycliffe was imprisoned for a while on the charge of heresy for this teaching.
  - He and/or people with whom he worked translated the Bible into English for the first time. He/They finished the New Testament in 1382. Nicholas of Hereford finished most of the Old Testament in 1384. All original copies of Wycliffe's Bible were hand-written. About 200 copies still exist today.
  - He taught that everyone in the church is equal. This idea helped lead to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in London.
  - Wycliffe's ideas were condemned in London in 1382, but his teachings spread, especially to Bohemia, which had sent a large number of students to Oxford.
  - Wycliffe is often called the "Morning Star of the Reformation" because his ideas led the back-to-the-Bible movement that inspired the Reformation.
  - Contrary to some reports today, John Wycliffe was not burned at the stake. He died naturally of a stroke in 1384. However, in 1415 the Roman Catholic Church declared him a heretic for his criticisms of the church and for translating the Bible into English. In 1428, under orders from the pope, his remains were dug up, burned, and thrown into the River Swift.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Matthew 6:9-13)

Wycliffe's 1382 Translation

And thus ye schulen preye,
Oure fadir that art in heuenes, halewid be thi name;
thi kyngdoom come to; be thi wille don in erthe as in heuene;
yyue to vs this dai oure breed ouer othir substaunce;
and foryyue to vs oure dettis, as we foryyuen to oure dettouris;
and lede vs not in to temptacioun,
but delyuere vs fro yuel.

https://www.textusreceptusbibles.com/Wycliffe/40/6