



Christian Theologies of Power and Resistance

Session 2: Christendom and Its Discontents

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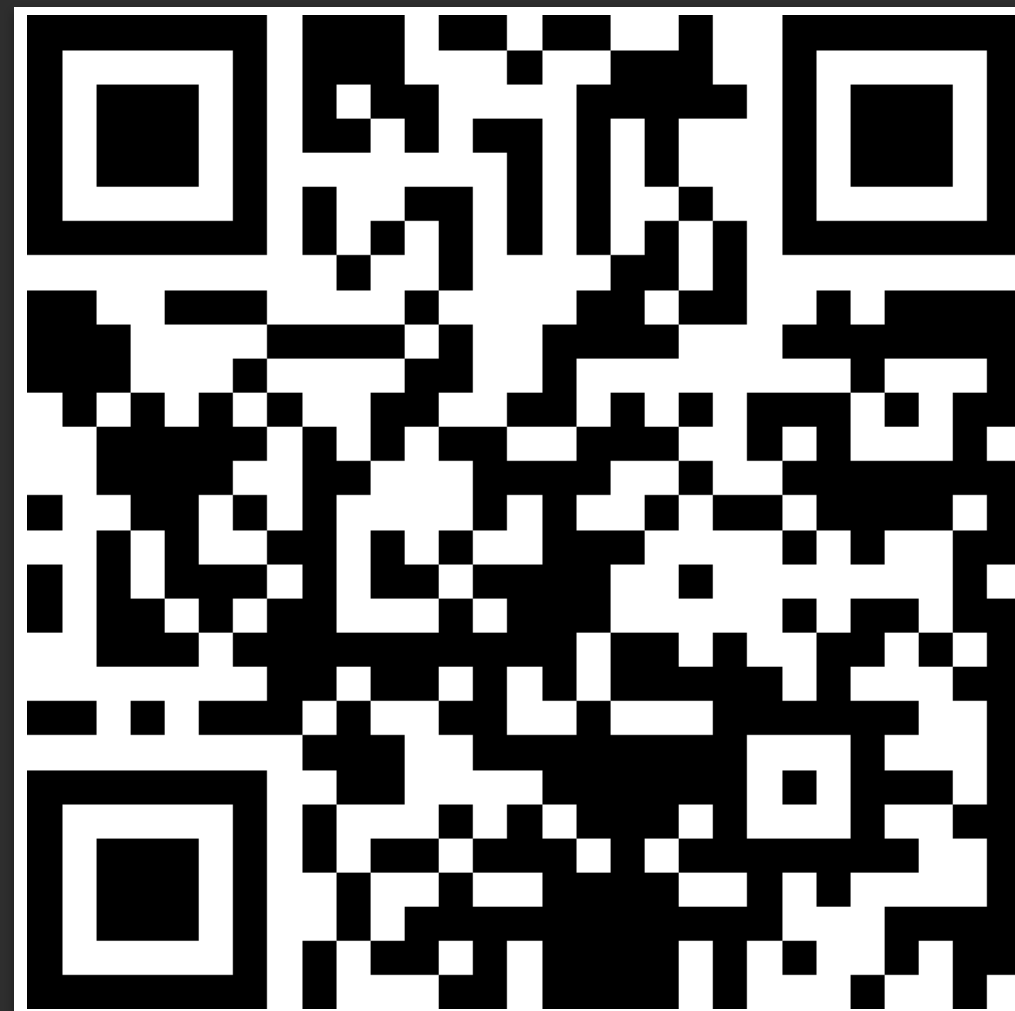
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Review from Last Week

How has the Christian tradition reckoned with having political power and resisting political power?

Religious Studies

Religious traditions (like Christianity) contain multitudes and are multivocal.

The same source texts and traditions that can bolster abusive Christian imperialism and supremacy can also provide inspiration to Christian resistance movements and the pursuit of justice and equality.

VS.

Theology

Jesus and the early church lived a disempowered, colonized existence and many in the early church had a radical anti-imperial vision of the equalizing kingdom of God.

But as Christians have gained political and cultural power, they have frequently distorted Jesus's teaching and developed theologies to justify domination, greed, and other behaviors that were antithetical to



Religious Studies

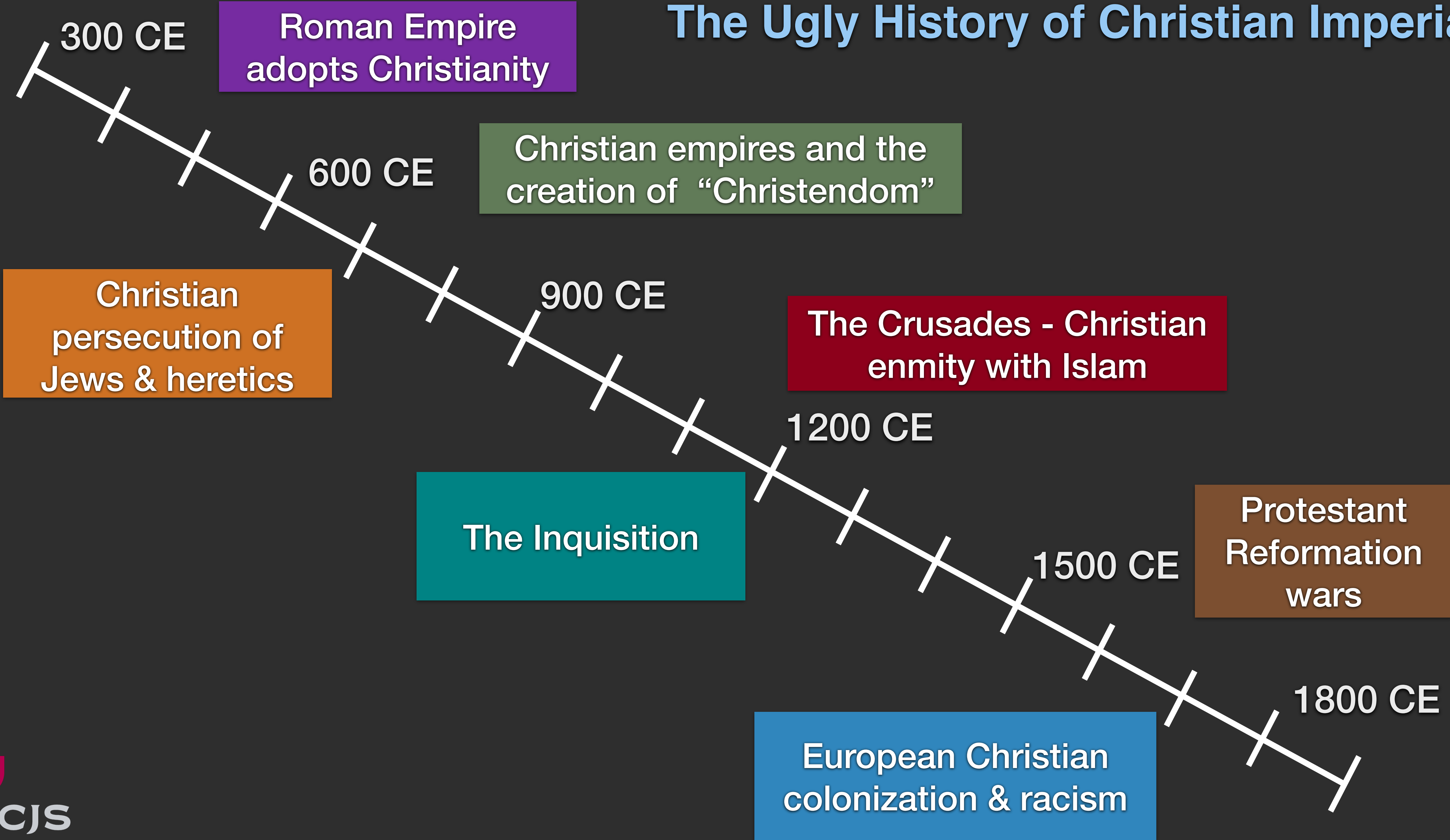
Review from Last Week

- The Roman Empire had a particularly brutal and rigidly hierarchical social order from Caesar (a self-declared god) down to the slaves who made up 35% of the population.
- Rome's general "toleration" of foreign religions ran aground on Christianity — Christianity was too new, too politically charged (as in, disruptive to the social order), too opposed to the imperial cult to be left alone.
- This cultural reality (colonial oppression, brutal taxation, constant violence, male-elite domination) is rarely mentioned or described in the New Testament, because it's the water early Christian communities swam in.
- Roman persecution of Christians was less constant and more episodic and often regional, but it left a searing impression on the early church about their distance from political power.
- Across the various genres and Christian factions behind the texts of the New Testament runs a deeply subversive, anti-imperial, anti-rich theme — both in the preserved teachings of Jesus and the first generations of Christians.



TODAY: So how did we get from there to Christian empires, Christian colonialism, Christian enslavement?

The Ugly History of Christian Imperialism



Pop Quiz - Important Christian Rulers

1. Who convened the Council of Nicaea that anchored the Christian doctrine of the Trinity?

2. Who ended Christian persecution in the Roman Empire?

3. Who began construction on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem?

4. Who was the first Christian ruler to decree Sunday a day of rest for the realm?

5. Who began construction on the original St. Peter's Basilica in Rome?

6. Who founded the capital of the Byzantine Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean?

7. Who was credited by medieval scribes with establishing the papacy?

8. Who is responsible for Christians celebrating Christmas on December 25th?

9. Who separated Easter from the Jewish calendar and pegged it to the Roman calendar?

A. Constantine the Great (272–337 CE)

B. Charlemagne (748–814 CE)

C. Pope Urban II (1035–1099 CE)

D. Henry VIII (1491–1547 CE)

Theological Debates in Early Christianity

- The paradoxes of Christian belief (a divine human, a tripartite division within God) led to a multitude of different early intra-Christian debates
- Pretty quickly, these debates became framed as “orthodoxy” vs. “heresy” — with both sides claiming to be orthodox.

“Orthodox”

Greek: *orthós* + *dóxa*
(straight, correct) (belief, worship)

- Ongoing Roman philosophical and polytheistic scorn (+ periodic persecution) made Christianity the edgy new kid on the block among competing mystery religions, imperial cults, and foreign religions
- These theological fights could be tough, and sometimes even got physical, but no Christian faction had true political power, so no one could actually “excommunicate” (remove communion) the other

Are Christians part of Judaism
(i.e., Torah observant)?

Is the body of Jesus a real
human body or just an illusion
concocted by God?



Are there ongoing definitive
revelations through Christian
prophets?

Is the God of the Hebrew Bible
also God in the New Testament?



and along comes Arius...



Leading into the Council of Nicaea

- North African (Berber) presbyter — roughly “priest” — Arius challenged the bishop of Alexandria’s understanding of the relationship between God the Son and God the Father.
- Arius: “There was a time that the Son was not” — Hence, there isn’t really a Trinity to speak of, because God the Father begets the Son (and, by implication, the Spirit). In other words, there are gradations of “divinity.”
- This was a genuine theological crisis, and Arius’s position proved quite popular and understandable in that it removed some of the paradox from Christian theology.
- But in the view of most bishops, this was heresy. So the bishops took an unprecedented step.





Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea



- Few figures have changed Christianity as much as Constantine.
- One of several claimants to emperor, he converts to Christianity in 312 CE on the verge of a battle with the other Western imperial claimant.
- Constantine claimed to have had a vision of a cross (or chi rho) and the text “In Hoc Signo Vinces” — By this sign, conquer.
- He continued to publicly worship the sun god Sol Invictus long after his “conversion” and was only baptized on his deathbed.
- When the Arian controversy broke out, Constantine saw an opportunity to unite Christians in a single faith, but also a chance to consolidate his own power over Christianity.



Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea

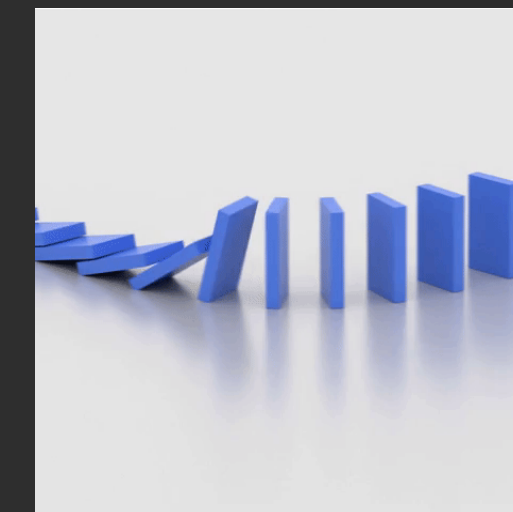


- 325 CE — Constantine summons bishops across the empire “by imperial injunction” to Nicaea to resolve the Arian controversy at his expense. Hundreds of bishops and their entourages respond.
- The product: the Nicene Creed, a profound theological statement resolving the Arian controversy, and serving as a unifying document for 97% of self-described Christians today. It’s the touchstone for all later credal formulations for Christianity.
- But the process: The bishops also subordinated their authority and church leadership to Constantine. They were coopted by the occupant of the same office as the Caesars who executed Jesus, colonized his people, and persecuted their ancestors.
- “Heretics” (i.e., those who followed the theology of Arius) were exiled. Constantine ordered Arius’s writings be burned.

with rays of light, reflecting the glowing radiance of a purple robe, and adorned with the brilliant splendour of gold and precious stones. Such was the external appearance of his person; and with regard to his mind, it was evident that he was distinguished by piety and godly fear. This was indicated by his downcast eyes, the blush on his countenance, and the modesty of his gait. For the rest of his personal excellencies, he surpassed all present in height of stature and beauty of form, as well as in majestic dignity of mien, and invincible strength and vigour. All these graces, united to a suavity of manner, and a serenity becoming his imperial station, declared the excellence of his mental qualities to be above all praise.

As soon as he had advanced to the upper end of the seats, at first he remained standing, and when a low chair of wrought gold had been set for him, he waited until the bishops had beckoned to him, and then sat down, and after him the whole assembly did the same.

from Eusebius of Caesarea
account of the Council in *Life of Constantine*



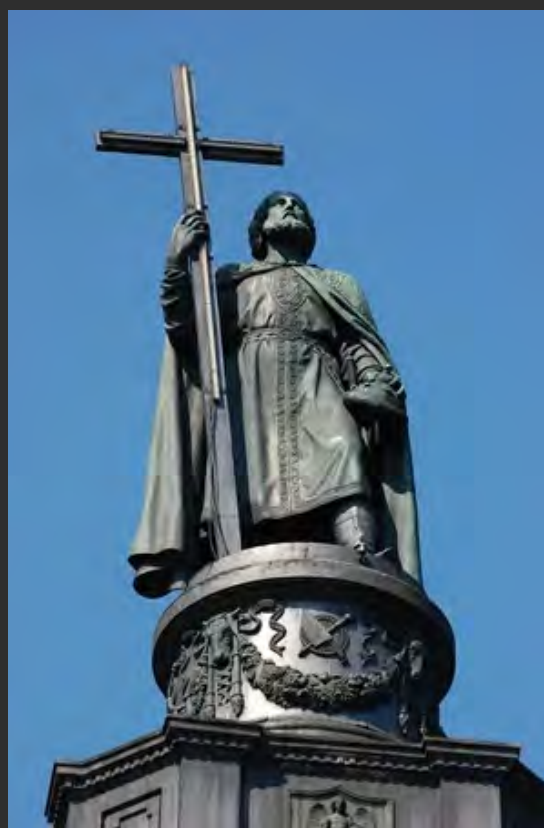
DOMINO #1
(1) Orthodoxy needs a political enforcer.

imperialism

(noun) HISTORICAL - rule by an emperor
MODERN - expansion for expansion's sake

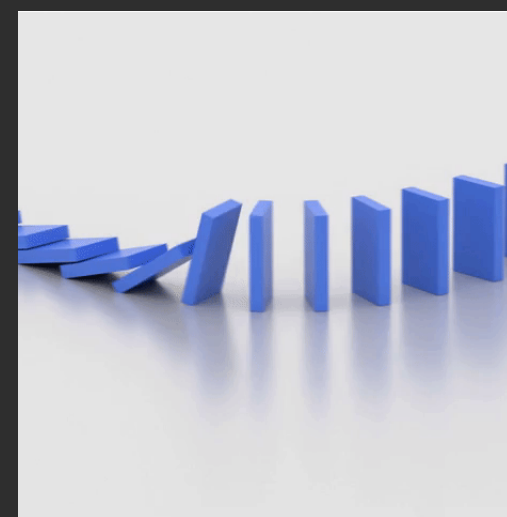


Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) Churches in 1054



Christian Imperialism(s)

- **Emperor Theodosius (r. 379-395) extinguished Arianism and made Nicene Christianity the official religion of the empire.**
- **The Late Roman empire was fragile, and, over time, two power centers developed — East in Constantinople (Byzantium) and West in Rome.**
- **A hierarchy of authority develops within the church (Bishop of Rome = Pope vs. Patriarch of Constantinople) to interface with and mirror the imperial hierarchy.**
- **This precipitates the “Great Schism” in 1054 CE where the Pope excommunicates the Patriarch of Constantinople and vice versa — leads to the Roman Catholic Church and the (Eastern) Orthodox Church. Now there are multiple, competing Christian empires.**
- **Imperial expansion & alliances are now linked to Christian “faith” — e.g., the “conversion” of Prince Volodymyr (Vladimir I) of Kyiv in 988 as part of an alliance of marriage and military aid with the Byzantine emperor**



DOMINO #2

(2) Orthodoxy has geographical boundaries that must be policed and expanded.

Christendom

(noun)—The geographical realm or set of governing entities that is ruled over by Christian political authorities

- There is no discernible trace of a political-geographic conception of Christianity in the New Testament, because the early church's situation was so far removed from having political control.
- As the Christendom paradigm sets in, many of Christian principles and practices become enmeshed with imperial power:
 - Jesus, the victim of imperial domination, becomes a tool for empire
 - Spreading the Gospel (evangelism) becomes coercive and tied to civic belonging — to belong to Christendom is to be Christian or be suspect
 - “Heretics” threaten the social order and could have property seized or be put to death, even when they have legitimate criticisms
 - The Jews — Jesus's own people — become a proximate Other. Previous Roman imperial/political persecution of Jews blends with Christian anti-Jewish theology to give rise to violent Christian attacks on Jews.

Christian imperialism →

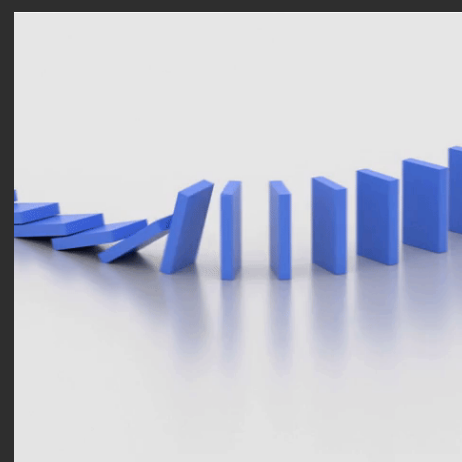
Christendom



Charlemagne crowned as Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in 800



“Pogrom in the Middle Ages” by Rudi Lesser



DOMINO #3

(3) The previous orthodoxy-heresy debates become a two-tiered vision of humanity: Christian and Other (Jew, pagan, Muslim).

crusade

(noun) from the French *croisade* -
literally, “marked with the cross”



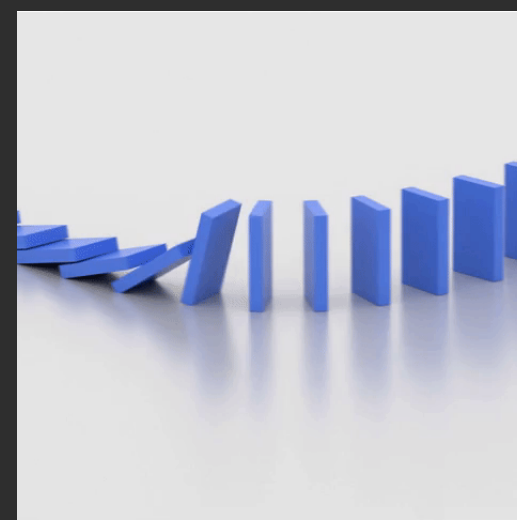
[Jesus] commands in the Gospel, "He that
taketh not his cross and followeth after me,
is not worthy of me." - Urban II

The Crusades



- Muslim (Arab) armies conquered the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Iberian Peninsula from the Byzantine and Sasanian (Persian) empires in the 600s CE
- Around 1095 CE, the Patriarch of Constantinople appealed to Pope Urban II for help against the invading Seljuk Turks.
- At the Council of Clermont, Urban calls for a holy war to take back Jerusalem “the navel of the world” from “the kingdom of the Persians, an accursed race.”
- Urban offers a plenary indulgence (removal of temporal punishment for all sins) to all who fight and/or die in the crusade.
- This inaugurates a period of 300+ years of holy wars, usually against Islam (the rival to Christian hegemony), but also against the Byzantines, other Christians, and anyone else who borders Christendom.

DOMINOES #4 & 5



- (4) The cross, the instrument of imperial torture for Jesus, becomes the sign of Christian imperial conquest.
- (5) There is a “holy land” (defined by Christian theology). It belongs to Christendom, and killing Muslims & Jews (enemies of Christ) to recapture it is a holy act of piety.

The Inquisition

- The first inquisitions were begun in the 12th century (shortly after the Crusades began) to root out “dangerous” heresies that did not adhere to the Catholic faith or submit to Catholic rulers.
- Inquisitors (usually priests or monks) were allowed to use torture to elicit confession or get heretics to denounce their heresies. Unrepentant heretics often got life imprisonment.
- The most notorious inquisition began in 1478 in Spain, where numerous Muslims and Jews were interspersed with the Christian population.
- Under persecution, about 200,000 Jews had previously (ostensibly) converted to Christianity. They were called *conversos* or “New Christians.”
- The *conversos* were suspected of heresy, insincerity, and maintaining their Jewish identities, so they were interrogated, prevented from holding public office, and blocked from intermarrying with “Old Christians.” This was talked about as protecting *limpieza de sangre* (blood purity).

inquisition

(noun)—a formal Catholic judicial process for investigating and punishing heresy, apostasy, blasphemy, witchcraft, etc.



DOMINO #6

- (6) Even among Christians, quasi-racial categories are introduced to differentiate superior Christians from inferior Christians.

The Protestant Reformation(s)

- Many “Protestant” complaints about the abuses and corruption in the Catholic Church had been circulating for centuries, had been repressed through Inquisitions, and were generally agreed to be problems.
- There were at least four major Reformation strands, each of which calibrated their approach to political power and Christendom differently:



Church of England (Anglican)

Perfect alignment: King Henry VIII replaces the pope with himself as the head of the church.

Reformed / Calvinist

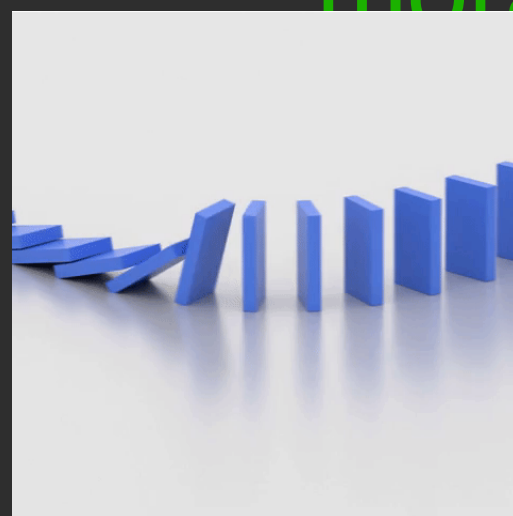
Cooperation: The church and the secular government have different spheres, but they should cooperate in encouraging Christian morality.

Lutheran

Paradox: There are two kingdoms, the kingdom of the world (with the sword) and noncoercive kingdom of God. Christians should be dutiful citizens of both.

Anabaptist

Resistance: With an early version of separation of church & state, they discouraged Christians from even holding public office.

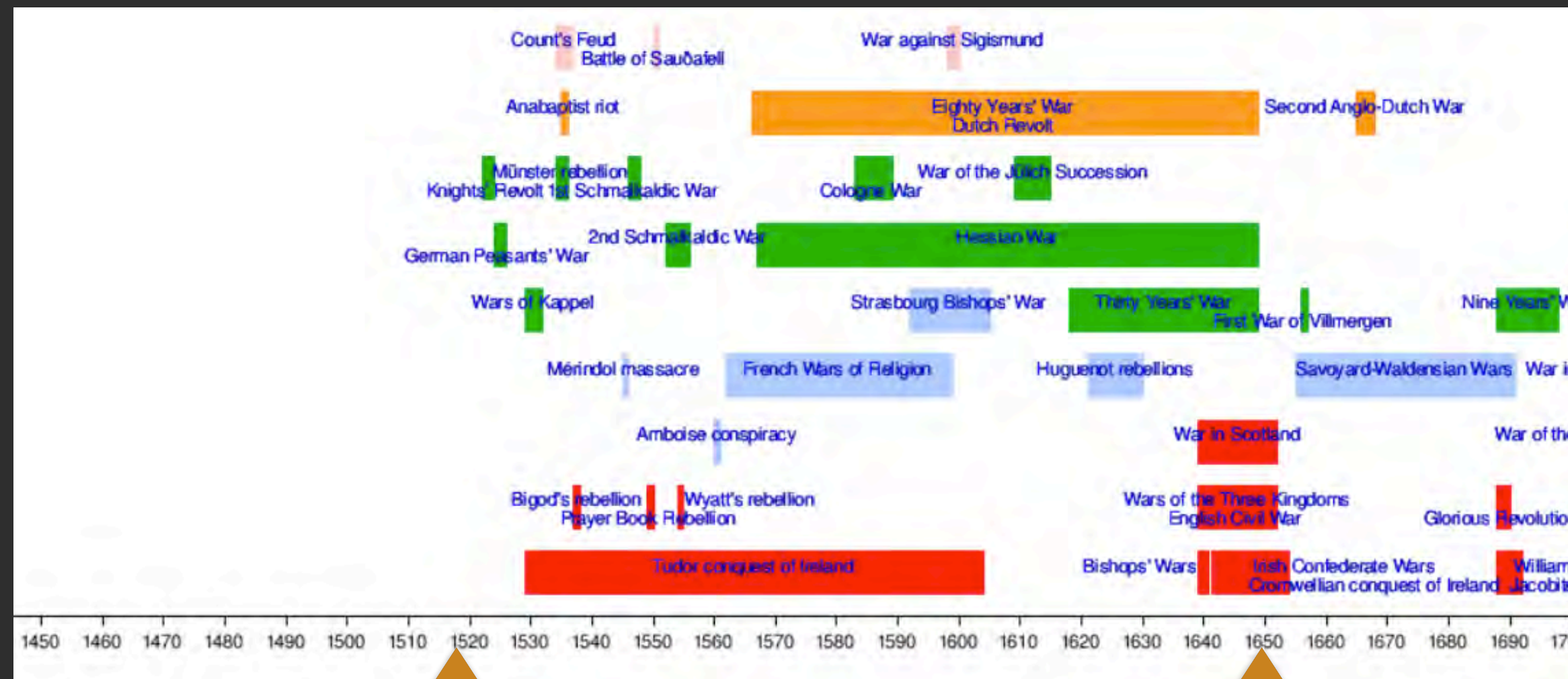


DOMINO #7

(7) Christian authority is not merely the realm of emperors and popes, and just about any aggressive power grab can be theologically justified.

“The Wars of the Reformation” and the Westphalian Settlement

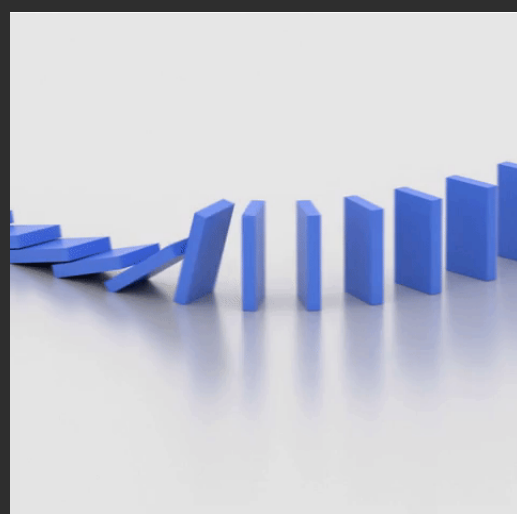
Religio-political Wars in Europe



Beginning of
Reformations

Peace of
Westphalia

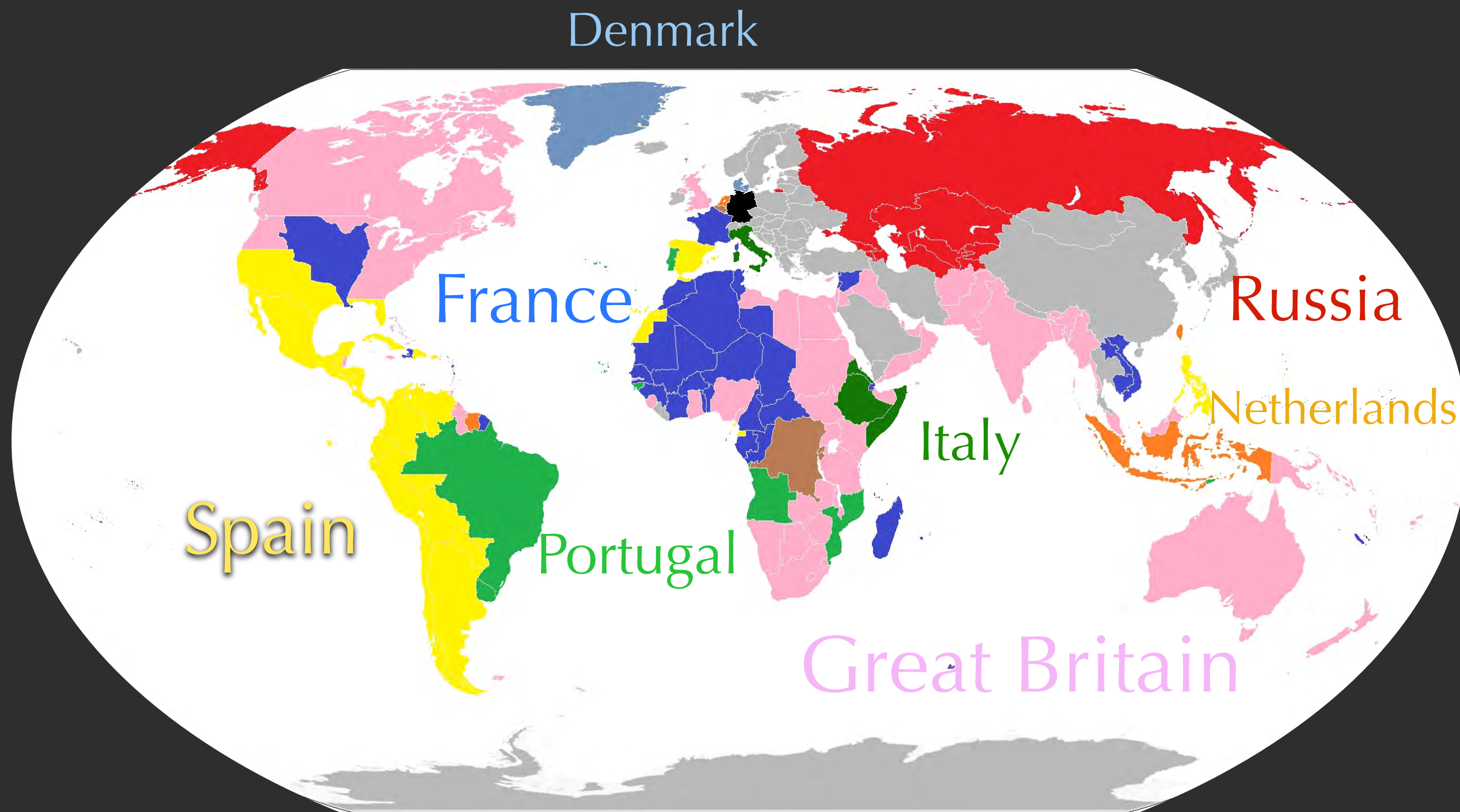
- Amid the theological fights of the Reformations, Europe descends into chaos, with all kinds of new political entities claiming power and carving out territory.
- These wars are not only Protestant on Catholic, but sometimes Protestant on Protestant or a coalition of Protestants and Catholics against other Protestants.
- These brutal conflicts led to widespread famine and plagues, and as much as 2/3 of the population in some regions died.
- The Peace of Westphalia (1648) brought an end to this period, ended the Holy Roman Empire, and created proto-modern nation states that could control their own borders and boundaries.



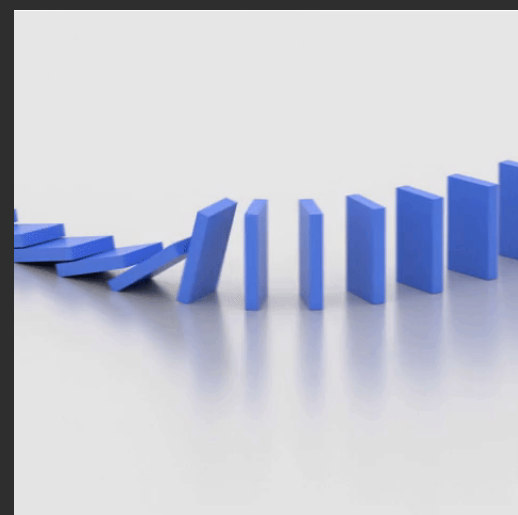
DOMINO #8

(8) European “Sovereign Nations” replace empires, and whoever is sovereign — king, prince, elected officials — gets to determine the established (official) religion and regulate all others.

European Christian Colonialism



- All of these Inquisition-Reformation developments occurred on the doorstep of the Age of Exploration. As the new European nation-states carved up the globe into colonies and spheres of influence, *Christendom went global*.
- Modern racism is built upon the foundations of Christian imperialism and new racial “sciences” that attempt to explain as intrinsic the inequalities of power between colonizer and colonized.
- The slave trade, colonial exploitation, and apartheid states all flow directly from these centuries of European expansion and domination.
- Armies of Christian missionaries accompany the armies of soldiers and bureaucrats who establish and maintain these colonial regimes.



DOMINO #9

- (9) Because of their self-declared racial superiority, White Christians claim dominance over non-white peoples, coercively proselytize them, yet, even if those people become Christians, they remain subjugated and hold inferior status

This is the ugliest side of the Christian tradition.

Mental Break: How are you feeling?

(Try to use one word. Multiple entries are welcome.)

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A Few Concluding Thoughts on Christian Imperialism... Then Some Hope

- From a religious studies perspective, this is all part of Christianity. But all of these imperial developments were historically contingent, not borne out of the “essence” of Christianity. It could have been different.
- From a theology perspective, Christian imperialism has corrupted a huge swath of traditions, practices, and inheritances with a logic of Christian supremacy, exclusion, and racism.
- All three of the major Christian theological traditions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) are implicated and enmeshed with this history.
- Modern Christian nationalists, Christian supremacists, and Christian imperialists are arguably part of the “mainstream” of Christian theology and practice.





St. Francis and the Franciscans



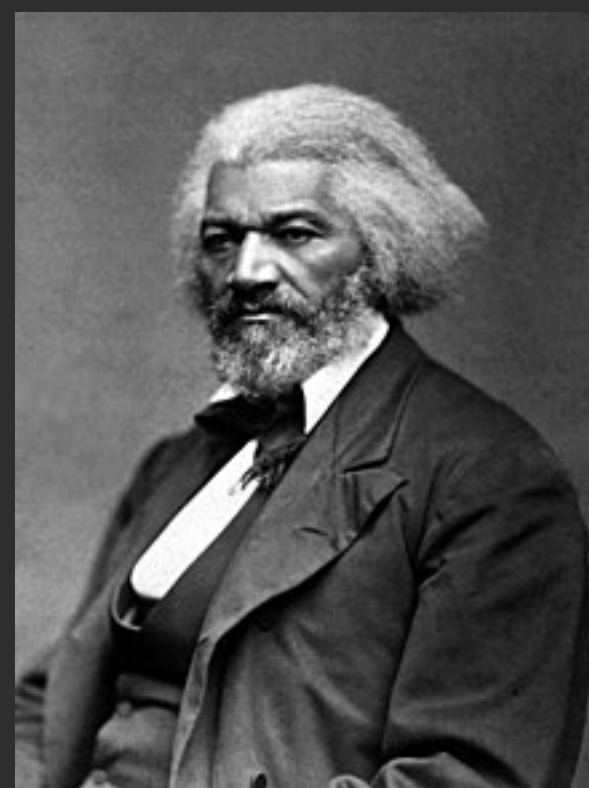
Peter Waldo and the Waldensians



The Amish and Mennonites (Anabaptists)



The Beguines and Beghards



Frederick Douglass and other enslaved and ex-slave theologians

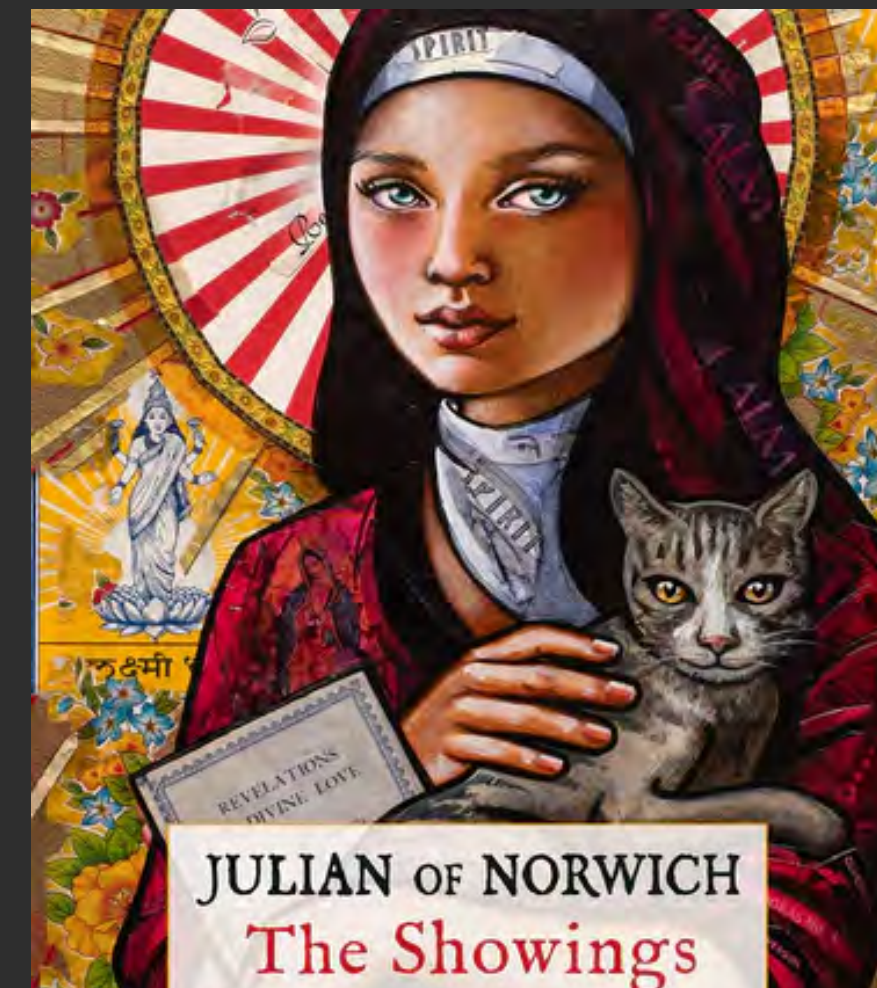
Theological Voices of Resistance

- Amid all this vicious history, the anti-imperial values and vision of Jesus and the early church were still there, and Christians throughout these centuries kept returning to the sources.
- Conscientious individuals, semi-official religious orders, and “heretical” communities were often carriers of theologies of resistance, challenging the assumptions and abuses of Christian imperialism.
- These leaders and groups were often persecuted by Christian authorities, excommunicated, and forced to relocate, but they also produced a counter-tradition of Christians resisting political power.
- Now is a good moment to study and learn from these, sometimes marginal, but supremely important Christian theologians and movements.

Julian of Norwich

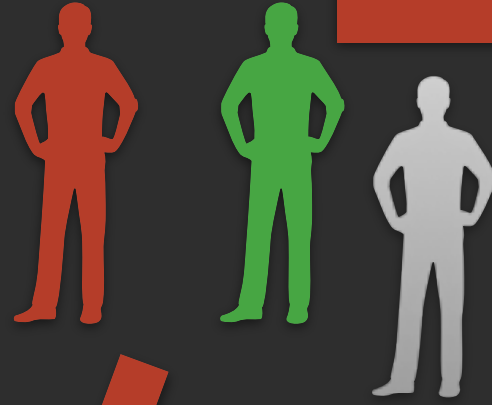
~1342 - ~1416 CE

- We don't actually know her name! We call her "Julian" because she was attached to the church of St. Julian in Norwich.
- She wrote the first (surviving) book by a woman in English.
- She was an anchoress (male: anchorite), a special kind of ascetic monastic order where the person would be sealed in a cell attached to a church.
- She is not formally canonized (not a saint), but the Anglican and Lutheran churches have a feast day for her.



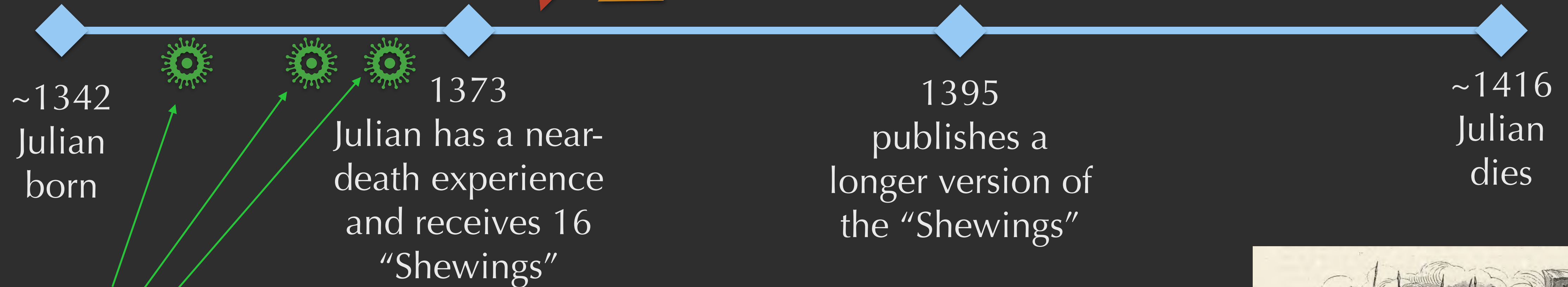
Julian of Norwich's Context

1378 - "Western Schism"
- 3 different popes



Avignon Papacy (1309-1376) with French kings controlling the popes

1381 - Peasant Revolt is brutally put down



The Black Plague sweeps through Norwich three times before Julian was 30 years old

Henry Despenser (bishop of Norwich 1370-1406) —known for: a failed crusade to Flanders, severe repression of the Peasant Revolt, and persecuting the Lollards (followers of John Wycliffe)



THE BISHOP OF NORWICH AT THE HEAD OF HIS TROOPS. Designed from Contemporary Authorities.

Julian's Life Experience

- enclosed alone in a cell for the rest of her life — She's evidently already in the cell when she has her near-death experience.
- In iconography, she's often depicted with a cat — if accurate, that would have been to keep the rats at bay.
- anchoresses/anchorites were put into their cell with an elaborate ceremony of burial, and they would spend time digging their own grave in their cells.
- One window facing out to the town to receive food donations and converse with people
- One window facing into the church for services and to receive communion



Julian of Norwich, “Shewings”

(a.k.a. “Revelations of Divine Love”)

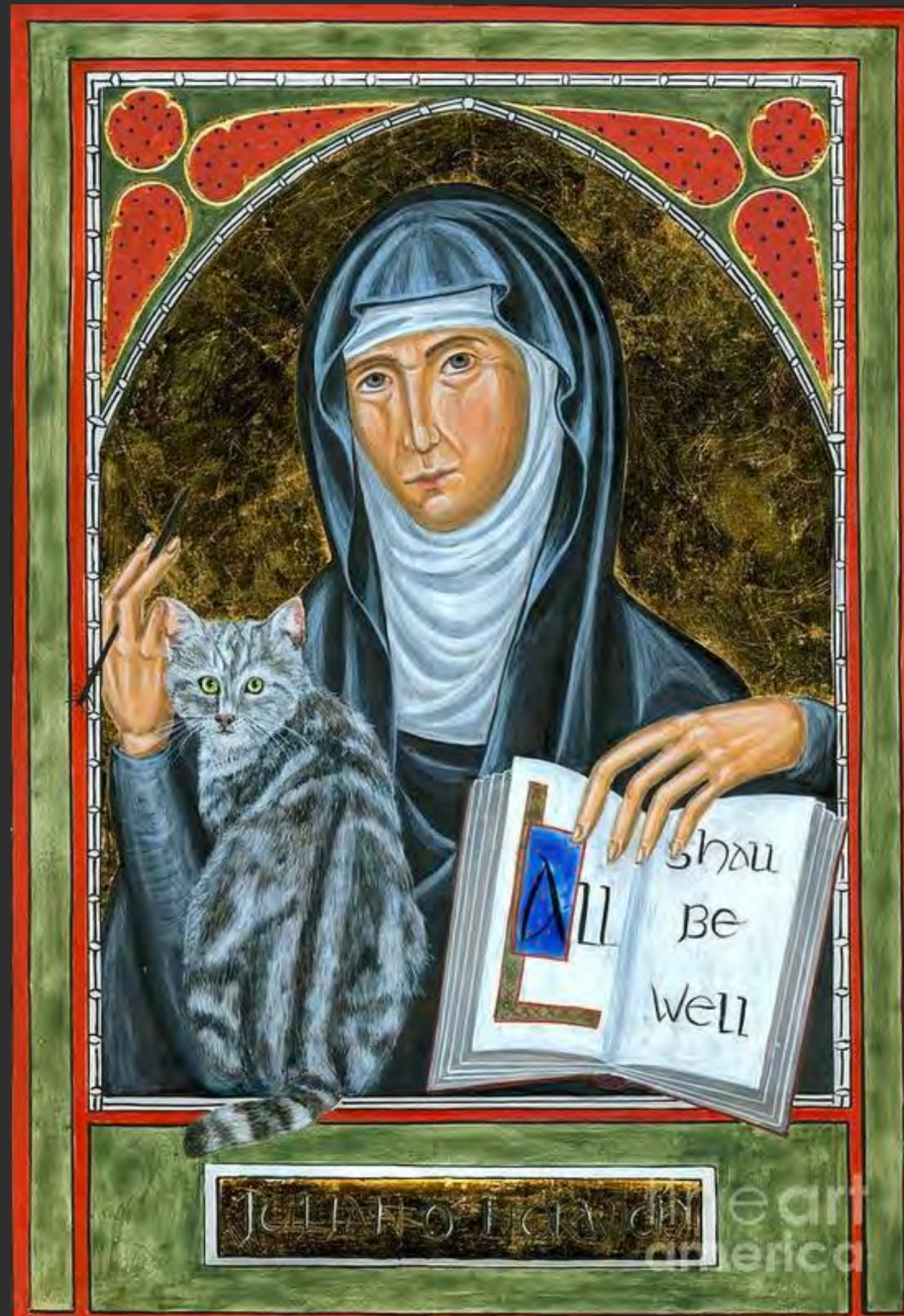
I perceived, truly and powerfully, that it was [Jesus] who just so, both God and man, himself suffered for me, who showed it to me without any intermediary.

And in the same revelation, suddenly the Trinity filled my heart full of the greatest joy, and understood that it will be so in heaven without end to all who will come there. For the Trinity is God, God is the Trinity. The Trinity is our maker, the Trinity is our protector, the Trinity is our everlasting lover, the Trinity is our endless joy and our bliss, by our Lord Jesus Christ and in our Lord Jesus Christ. (181)



Julian of Norwich, “Shewings”

(a.k.a. “Revelations of Divine Love”)



I am not good because of the revelations, but only if I love God better; and inasmuch as you love God better, it is more to you than to me... for we are all one in love, for truly it was not revealed to me that God loves me better than the humblest soul who is in a state of grace. For I am sure that there are many who never had revelations or visions, but only the common teaching of Holy Church, who love God better than I...

For it is in this unity that the life of all men consists who will be saved. For God is everything that is good, as I see; and God has made everything that is made, and God loves everything he has made... For God is in man and God is all. And he who loves thus loves all. (191-192)

Julian of Norwich, “Shewings”

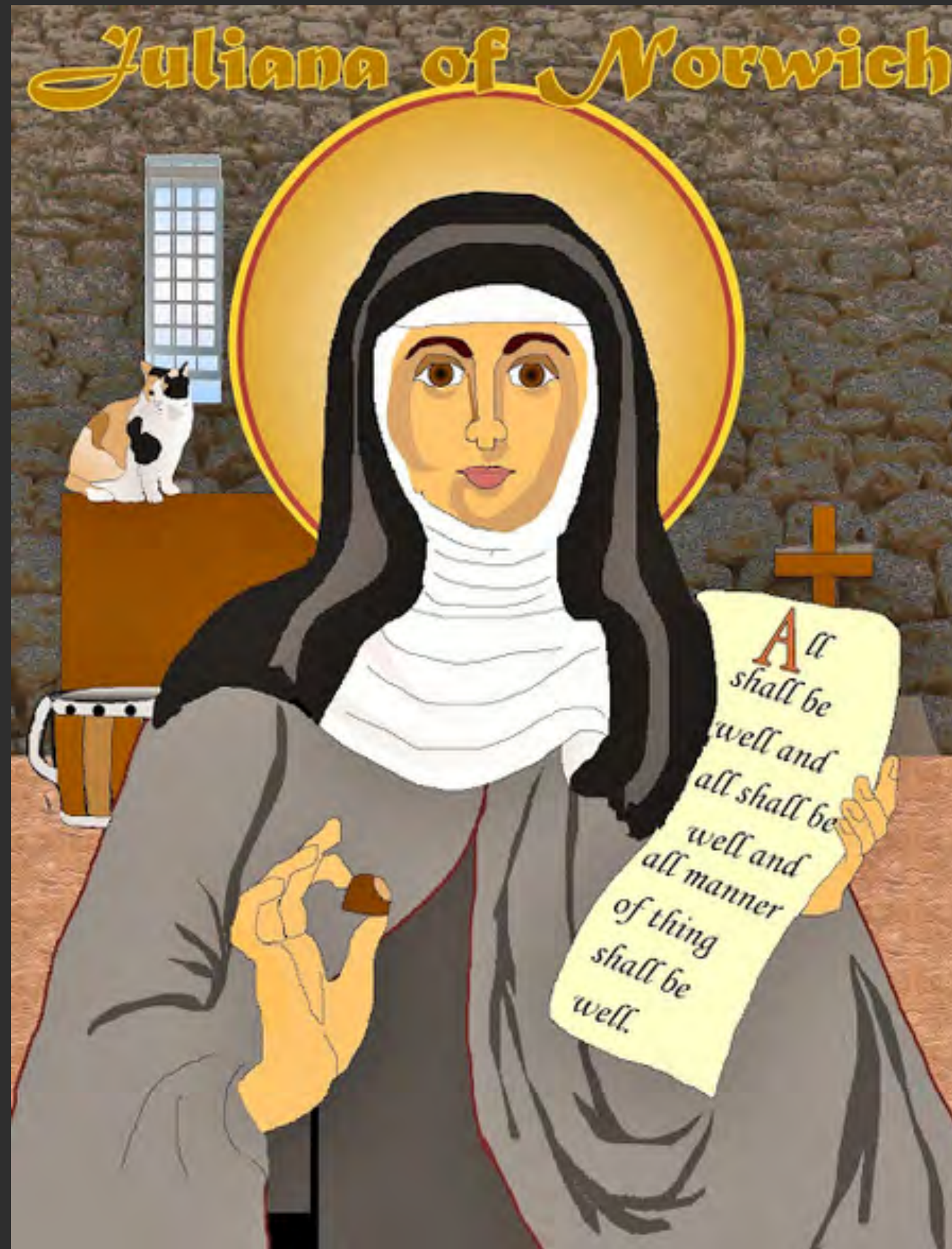
(a.k.a. “Revelations of Divine Love”)

Holy Church will be shaken in sorrow and anguish and tribulation in this world as men shake a cloth in the wind... Yes, I even saw that our Lord rejoices with pity and compassion over the tribulation of his servants; and he imposes on every person whom he loves, to bring him to his bliss, something that is no defect in his sight, through which souls are humiliated and despised in this world, scorned and mocked and rejected. And he does this to prevent the harm which they might have from the pomps and pride and the vainglory of this wretched life, and to prepare their way to come to heaven, into endless, everlasting bliss. For he says: I shall completely break down in you your empty affections and your vicious pride, and then I shall gather you to make you meek and mild, pure and holy through union with me. (226-227)



Julian of Norwich, “Shewings”

(a.k.a. “Revelations of Divine Love”)



There is a deed which the blessed Trinity will perform on the last day, as I see it, and what the deed will be and how it will be performed is unknown to every creature who is inferior to Christ, and it will be until the deed is done...

...one article of our faith is that many creatures will be damned, such as the angels who fell out of heaven because of pride, who are now devils, and many men upon earth who die out of the faith of Holy Church, that is to say those who are pagans and many who have received baptism and who live unchristian lives and so die out of God's love. All these will be eternally condemned, as Holy Church teaches me to believe.

And all this being so, it seemed to me that it was impossible that every kind of thing should be well, as our Lord revealed at this time. And to this I had no other explanation from our Lord except this: What is impossible to you is not impossible to me. I shall preserve my word in everything, and I shall make everything well. (232-233)

Julian of Norwich, “Shewings”

(a.k.a. “Revelations of Divine Love”)

I saw and understood that the great power of the Trinity is our father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our mother, and the great love the Trinity is our lord; and we have all this by nature and in our essential being....

...the second Person of the Trinity [i.e., Jesus, the Son] is our mother in nature and in our essential creation, in who we are grounded and rooted, and he is our mother in mercy in taking on our sensory being. And so our Mother, in whom our parts are kept unparted, works in us in various ways; for in our Mother, Christ, we profit and grow, and in his mercy he reforms and restores us, and through the power of his Passion and his death and rising again, he unites us to our essential being. This is how our Mother mercifully acts to all his children who are submissive and obedient to him. (138)



Julian of Norwich, “Shewings”

(a.k.a. “Revelations of Divine Love”)



The mother can give her child milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and he does so most generously and most tenderly with the holy sacrament which is the precious food of life itself. And with all the sweet sacraments he sustains us most mercifully and most graciously...

The mother can lay the child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother Jesus, he can familiarly lead us into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show within part of the Godhead and the joys of heaven, with spiritual certainty of endless bliss...

And in this I saw that all the debt we owe, at God's bidding, for his fatherhood and motherhood, is fulfilled by loving God truly; a blessed love which Christ arouses in us. (141-142)

Our Final Session

- Modern Christian theologies of resistance — What happens when colonized and enslaved people do theology for themselves?
- The new iterations and reanimations of Christian imperialism that are threatening global peace and security and American pluralism right now
- Can we ever get to a post-Christendom era?



**Barmen
Declaration**

