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SEE ALSO *Philosophy: The Retreat from Reason: Mysticism*

SIGNIFICANT PEOPLE *in Religion*

THOMAS BECKET

1120–1170

Archbishop of Canterbury

Diplomat

Martyr

COMPANION TO THE KING. Thomas Becket was the son of Norman settlers who lived in the city of London. His father was a merchant who traveled among the circles of French-speaking Norman immigrants. The name "Becket" is likely a nickname, possibly meaning beak or nose, which was given to his father. As a boy, Thomas studied with the Augustinian canons at Merton Priory and later at the cathedral school of St. Paul. Some suggest that as a young man Becket studied in Paris under Thomas Melun. Around 1141 he came into the service of Theobald, the archbishop of Canterbury, whose household companions included several future bishops. Thomas was later sent to study law at Bologna and Auxerre, likely entering into minor clerical orders along the way, and eventually becoming a subdeacon. Theobald consecrated Thomas as an archdeacon at Canterbury in 1154, and he continued in the service of the bishop's household where he had been for nearly ten years prior. Soon after, the young king Henry II's backers chose

Thomas for the position of chancellor of the realm, which was essentially a secular position as royal counselor. While working in the English court, Becket developed an extremely close friendship with the king, accompanying him on hunting expeditions and even a successful military campaign in Aquitaine, where Thomas commanded an army of hundreds of knights and thousands of mercenary soldiers. Upon the death of Archbishop Theobald in 1162, Henry asked Thomas to take the position of archbishop of Canterbury. It may have been Henry's wish that his close friend hold both positions of chancellor and archbishop since the king then would be able to exert significant influence over the English church.

A SURPRISING CONVERSION. To Henry's surprise, upon his friend's ordination to the priesthood in June of 1161, and his elevation to the archbishopric one day later, Thomas resigned his post as chancellor. He quickly began to take his new office very seriously. It is said that he lived an almost ascetic lifestyle, rising early to pray, enduring humiliations like washing the feet of the poor, wearing a purposely uncomfortable hair shirt, scourging himself out of indifference to his flesh, studying the scriptures, and surrounding himself with learned churchmen. It was not long before he came into conflict with the king over the rights and authority of the church, as well as the notion of church taxation. One particularly distasteful battle took place over a document known as the Constitutions of Clarendon. Issued by Henry II near Salisbury in 1164, it reasserted the church-state customs and relationship conducted during the time of Henry's grandfather, Henry I (r. 1100–1135). Issues concerning the judgment and punishment of clerics by secular powers, freedom of the bishops to travel outside the realm without royal consent, the requirement that the church obtain the king's permission before excommunicating his tenants, and the crown's entitlement to income from vacated church lands were among the more vexing statutes. In essence, these propositions gave the king specific and, as Thomas saw it, excessive legal authority over the church. Henry demanded that the bishops swear oaths to the effect that they would uphold the Clarendon conditions. Thomas reluctantly did so, along with other bishops present. However, Thomas later regretted the decision when Pope Alexander III openly denounced the Constitutions of Clarendon. Thomas felt obliged to uphold the opinion of Rome and, after being found guilty at a public trial, escaped England and fled to France where he lived in exile for six years. His years living as a penitent monk in Cistercian and Benedictine houses were not comfortable, especially since he had little support from his fellow bishops or even from Pope Alexander,

who was distracted by the claims of an anti-pope. After several attempts at reconciliation and the threat of interdict issued by Alexander III, Thomas and Henry agreed to a “rhetorical” compromise, which in no way actually modified either man’s position. Becket returned to England in 1170 and resumed his role as archbishop of Canterbury. But less than a month after his arrival, disgruntled elements in the royal circle inflated issues related to Thomas’s excommunication of several bishops who had acted in defiance of Rome, on the king’s behalf, and were being punished by Thomas. Hearing Henry II’s displeasure over another confrontation with Thomas, four of the king’s knights took the initiative to rid the realm of the troublesome cleric for good. After an argumentative exchange in Thomas’s chambers, the knights followed the archbishop into Canterbury Cathedral, where they attacked and killed him.

SAINTHOOD AND KINGLY PENANCE. Upon news of Thomas Becket’s murder, Pope Alexander III went into mourning, then placed an interdict (exclusion from sacraments) upon King Henry II. At Sens, the French archbishop imposed interdict over the inhabitants of all the king’s lands on the European continent. Henry was eager to make peace with the church, and at Avranches in 1172 conceded to give in to the notion of appeals to Rome in all cases of church disputes. He also restored all property to the archbishopric of Canterbury and made a vow to go on a crusade to the Holy Land. Henry even agreed to the exemption of clerics from the jurisdiction of secular courts. In 1173, just two years after his death, Thomas was canonized as a saint of the church. The cathedral at Canterbury where he was murdered became a famous pilgrim site, one even visited by the penitent Henry II himself in July of 1174. It is said that he walked barefoot from the city gates to the tomb of his former friend, admitted his guilt in the archbishop’s death, and submitted himself to some 240 lashes administered by the monks from Canterbury Cathedral. As in the case of Henry IV of Germany during the investiture crisis (some 100 years earlier), a monarch’s act of penitence and humility, whether calculated or not, demonstrated the power of devotion that was held by Christians in Europe, even in the face of dominant secular authority.

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GREGORY VII

1021–1085

Pope

A SKILLED ADMINISTRATOR. Gregory VII served the church in Rome for many long and distinguished years before becoming pope in 1073. Consequently, he is more often than other popes referred to by his given name, which was Hildebrand. He was born to a poor family in Tuscany and came to Rome as a boy to be educated at the monastery of St. Mary on the Aventine Hill. Although it has been suggested that he spent his early days as a monk, scholars now think that unlikely. Hildebrand served under seven different popes before his own elevation. He was the chaplain of Pope Gregory VI and even accompanied him in exile to Germany during 1046 and 1047. Upon Gregory VI’s death, Hildebrand remained in Germany and worked with reform groups to create a more serious, committed, and spiritual outlook among European clergy. He returned to Rome in 1049 to work under Leo IX as an administrator of papal estates and properties (called the Patrimony of St. Peter). Hildebrand guided other papal successors through their pontificates (such as Nicholas II and Alexander II) and may even have been responsible for helping them get elected. There is little doubt Hildebrand came to influence a crafting of the legislation for the process by which cardinals eventually came to vote on papal successors. In 1059 he was given the title Archdeacon of the Roman church and also held the title of Chancellor of the Apostolic See. His election as pope in 1073 came as no surprise since he had held major administrative posts in Rome for some thirty years prior.

A MAJOR REFORMER. Upon his elevation to the Roman bishopric, Hildebrand began to work more aggressively to reform the morality of the church and clergy by issuing decrees against simony (the buying and selling of clerical offices), clerical participation in sexual activity, and lay investiture (conferring of authority to a church official by a secular prince or landowner). *Dic-tatus Papae*, which has been attributed to Gregory, declared Rome’s supreme authority in all religious matters. Monarchs reacted to these changing ideas of church authority in varying ways. In England, William the Conqueror saw to it that all of the Gregorian reforms, with the exception of rules against investiture, were rigorously carried out. In France, despite King Phillip I’s opposition, the bishops complied. Henry IV of Germany, however, posed a major stumbling block for Gregory’s vision, the most important results of which were to raise the

moral awareness of the clergy, create a more unified and powerful church governance, and establish an organized administrative system of papal legates. These changes set in place the ideology for the new reforming monastic movements beginning in the late eleventh century, the rebirth of Roman legalism linked to canon law, the condemnation of growing materialism in European society, and even the new theological and scholastic attitudes of the time. Moreover, he created an atmosphere of dialogue that eventually led to some measure of agreement on the vexed question of the existence of the “real presence” in the Eucharist (Christ’s actual presence in the elements of bread and wine). It was from the seeds of that resolution that the twelfth-century doctrinal view of transubstantiation would emerge. Although his effort to unite Eastern and Western Christianity were unsuccessful, only two other bishops of Rome, Gregory I (r. 590–604) and Innocent III (r. 1198–1216), could be said to have had as great an impact on the future of medieval Western Christianity.

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INNOCENT III

1160–1216

Pope

SECULAR INTERVENTIONS. Innocent III was born Lothario de Segni to a noble family and was educated at Paris and Bologna. As a young cleric, he rose through the ranks of the papal service, becoming a cardinal in 1190 and being elevated to the papacy in 1198 upon the death of Celestine III. It is interesting to note that Innocent was not yet ordained a priest at the time of his election. His strength lay in his ability to intervene effectively in secular affairs, and it has been suggested that no pope in the entire medieval era had a greater impact on the period in which he lived. Innocent reduced the size of the papal curia (the court or administrative body), wresting it from the grasp of Italian secular politics. He also was able to restore papal territories that had been lost over time to the Holy Roman Empire. Interventions in several conflicts over disputed succession to the Ger-

man throne were also among the accomplishments of Innocent. Examples of involvement in major European church and state politics include his interaction with the emerging kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula, the struggle for the conversion of eastern Europe to Christianity, and settlement of political disputes involving Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Above all, he sought to extend the powers of the bishop of Rome. Innocent was the first pope to employ the title “Vicar of Christ,” which implies the ability to act as Christ’s representative on earth. This is certainly a testament to the broad extent of his ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS. Another matter concerning spiritual and temporal powers which drew considerable attention during his reign was Innocent’s intervention in the issue of the succession of the archbishop of Canterbury in England. After declaring the election of 1205 invalid, Innocent placed his own candidate, Stephen Langton, in office after overriding separate decisions about candidacies by both the local bishops and King John. John’s failure to cooperate in the matter resulted in the entire kingdom of England being placed under an interdict which limited reception of the sacraments by all of the English people. Irreconcilable positions between crown and church resulted in the king’s excommunication (just prior to his capitulation in 1211). After a series of political twists involving Innocent’s revocation of Magna Carta, John finally took the position of accepting the pope as his overlord. Possibly the crowning achievement of Innocent’s pontificate was the fact that he presided over the Lateran Council of 1215. This massive gathering of clergy made major reforms to the medieval church, possibly marking it as the most important council of the entire Middle Ages. Nearly every bishop from the Catholic territories, some 25 churchmen from the Latin East (including Maronite bishops), representatives of canons from every cathedral chapter, the heads of the major religious orders, as well as secular representatives of the major kingdoms attended. Literally thousands of participants were summoned to the council. Most of the seventy or so decrees that were drafted by Innocent and his curia were not debated, but presented to the church. The majority of these decrees (or canons) involved pastoral care and the reform of the clergy, including their careful education by the bishops. There were also several crusades during his tenure, including the failed Third Crusade and the successful campaign against the Albigensian (Cathar) heretics. Innocent’s approval of the Franciscan and Dominican orders of friars proved to be of major significance to the growth of ministry and education for the church in the centuries to follow.

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MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG

1212–1281

Mystic
Spiritual writer

A VISIONARY BÉGUINE. Mechthild of Magdeburg was a German spiritual writer as well as a great mystic of the thirteenth century. She came from a noble Saxon family but rejected her heritage for an existence of simplicity and prayer. Mechthild joined a Béguine community at Magdeburg, devoting herself to a life filled with penance and humility. Like another of the great Béguine mystics, Hadewijch of Antwerp, she saw herself as a vessel of divine inspiration. Mechthild believed she had received the ability to speak, as inspired by God, directly from her visions of ecstasy, led by a charismatic spirit. One of her common themes was the notion that from weakness comes strength. Like other Béguines, she saw that a life lived in imitation of Christ was something open to all Christians, not just clerics and individuals in orders. Her prophetic calling was viewed as a transcendent communion with the love of God.

A THREAT TO CHURCH AUTHORITY. Like the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, Mechthild employed the image of bride and bridegroom from the Old Testament Song of Songs to convey her spiritual union. Because of her association with the secular world, it was also permissible for her to use the language of courtly love in her writings. Between 1250 and 1269 she produced a book about her visions entitled *Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit* (Outflowing Light of the Godhead). The work was written in bold poetic style and became quite influential on subsequent German medieval mystics. Mechthild, like Marie d'Oignies, was not afraid to point out the prevalent immoral activity of the clerics that she saw around her. She drew great criticism from

the male-dominated church, both for her freedom of expression and for her claims to receive direct divine communication. The period in which the Béguines operated was clearly a time when clerics were threatened by the profound piety of holy secular women, particularly when they admitted to having mystical experiences or direct illuminations. Not only did they undermine the authority of the hierarchy, but also it was felt that their lack of formal theological training might lead them into some type of heresy. The anti-mendicant Parisian master William of Saint-Amour once wrote that the laity stood in constant need of perfection through the ministry of the clergy. Since the Béguines were not under the authority of a religious order or secular clerics, the direction of their spiritual leadership and influence was seen as unregulated, uninformed, and unprofessional. Eventually, as with many other outspoken Béguines of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Mechthild was pressured into retreating to a convent. At the age of 62, she entered the Cistercian house at Helfta, where she continued writing and added one more volume to her work.

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MARIE D'OIGNIES

1177–1213

Mystic
Founding mother

A SPIRITUAL HEALER. Marie was born into a noble Flemish family near Liège in the Low Countries and was one of the first women to be recognized as a Béguine. Although she was married at fourteen, she and her husband did not consummate their marriage, but rather worked together in the care of the sick. At thirty, she renounced her wealth and retired to a cell at an Augustinian monastery, devoting herself to an ascetic, Christ-centered life in which she experienced ecstasies and visions, even to the point of accomplishing a miraculous three-day feat of incessant chanting and scriptural exegesis (critical interpretation). She was particularly well known as a spiritual healer, and her reputation inspired the growing groups of urban laywomen who were beginning to assemble together in parts of Germany and

the Lowlands to attempt to live holy lives in austere communities, but without taking formal vows as required within the official structure of recognized convents and monasteries. She is thus recognized as a founding mother of the movement of spiritual women known as the Béguines.

AN EXAMPLE OF A VIRTUOUS LIFE. The story of the life of Marie d'Oignies was written by Jacques de Vitry, who had relayed stories of virtuous Béguines to the papal curia. Jacques de Vitry had begun his career as an Augustinian canon and for one year was a neighbor and confessor to Marie, along with being a disciple of her spirituality. His biography of Marie d'Oignies was written to show the heretics of Languedoc an example of what a truly holy woman's life should be. Jacques wrote of Marie's extreme piety, her disdain for her fleshly self, and the inspiration that he drew from her criticisms of his own life of spiritual inadequacy. When Jacques became bishop, he used his stories to help the Béguines gain from Rome some type of temporary recognition, although he could not get them formally approved as an order. Gregory IX's bull *Gloriam Virginalem* did later recognize these chaste virgin women of Germany and afford them papal protection.

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DOCUMENTARY SOURCES *in Religion*

Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St. Benedict* (early 6th century)—This set of guidelines for monastic living, written by the abbot of Monte Casino for his own monastery and possibly some neighboring houses, focuses on humility and obedience. Promoting stability and stressing the need to give up all personal property, it offers practical and moderate advice for a community of monks designed to function almost as a family under a fatherly abbot. This rule was the most widely adopted by monasteries throughout medieval Europe from the ninth century onward.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (c. 1153)—This unfinished work by the first leader of the Cistercian Order follows the medieval exegetical scheme of fourfold meaning of Scripture: literal, allegorical, moral, and mystical. Themes range from behavior of monks to the mystical union between the Bridegroom (Christ) and the Bride (the Church).

St. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (The Journey of the Mind into God, 1259)—This Franciscan theologian, philosopher, and leader of his order (born John of Fidanza, c. 1217–1274) took a more traditional view than Thomas Aquinas of the relationship between human reason and the mysteries of God. In this work he puts forth the notion that human wisdom meant nothing or was a waste of time when compared to the profound mystical understanding that could be imparted by God to those of His faithful who were receptive to such enlightenment.

Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam* (1302)—This papal bull, named after its opening statement, claimed that there was “One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church” outside of which eternal salvation did not exist. The pope was seen as supreme head of the church, and to reject his authority was to sever ties with the institution to which God had granted spiritual authority. In short, obedience to the pope was necessary to salvation. While this statement was not universally accepted by all Christians and it really was not a new dictum, it did represent a summation concerning the church's vision of papal authority.

St. Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Sun* (1225)—This work is a hymn of praise to God's creation and the revelations of the divine that are found in nature. Traditionally thought to have been composed at the Garden of the Poor Clares at San Damiano, the poem was not written in Latin but in the Umbrian dialect of the Italian people. Francis encouraged his friars to recite or sing it while they were out preaching, and it is often mentioned in medieval writings concerning Franciscan spirituality. Many scholars now think that the second part of the hymn, dealing with the notions of peace, pardon, and death, was composed during a later period, possibly before the death of Francis.

Gratian, *Decretum* or *Concord of Discordant Canons* (early twelfth century)—The man called “the father of the science of canon law” (now believed to be two separate people) wrote this work, which had as its purpose the reconciliation of diverse and often contradictory thought on church law through the application of dialectic. It is divided into a treatise on law, a series of hypothetical cases, a tract on penance, and a sacramental tract.

Gregory of Palamas, *Heihasmos* or *Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychast* (c. 1338)—This theologian and monk of Mount Athos became immersed in the Hesychast tradition of mystical prayer. He wrote this famous treatise against Barlaam, a Greek Calabrian monk who supported the notion that God was unknowable. Gregory contended that it was possible for humans to experience the Divine Light. While he believed that God's essence might be unknowable, his energies—that is, the reality of God himself—are in all things and can be experienced and visualized by people in a direct sense through the workings of God's grace.

Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (c. 1151)—One of the first medieval women to write about theology and Christian spirituality, Hildegard (1098–1179) became widely known during her own lifetime. Her prophecies and visions were written down in a three-volume Latin work, the *Scivias*, often translated as “Know the Ways.” The work includes some 26 visions, a number of which were composed in poetry or later set to music. Hildegard used images to express spiritual concepts and discussed a range of topics from the Fall of Humanity to depictions of the institutional church, as well as renderings of the end of the world.

Julian of Norwich, *The Showings* (c. 1373–1393)—This work consists of the recounting and interpretation of a series of ecstatic revelations of the Passion of Christ and the Holy Trinity received in 1373 by Julian, an anchoress of Norwich. She completed the work some twenty years after the revelations took place, recounting her lifelong meditation upon the experience. Julian's writing on the mystery of faith and the life of prayer became a classic, reprinted in numerous fifteenth-century devotional works, where it served to emphasize the central place of God's love as the root of spiritual growth, determination, and perseverance.

Peter Lombard, *Four Books of the Sentences* or *Quattuor libri sententiarum* (1155–1157)—This comprehensive work arranges the opinions (*sententiae* in Latin) of the church fathers, especially Augustine, into a system with a logical

order of development. It was legislated into the curriculum of all theology students at the University of Paris in 1215 and remained there until the sixteenth century.

Summa Cartae Caritas or *The Charter of Love* (twelfth century)—This important charter laid out the constitution of the Cistercian Order and expressed a departure from the relationship between houses in the Benedictine Order, particularly as practiced in the tradition of Cluny. The document was said to have first been presented to Pope Callixtus II in 1119, outlining the autonomy of Cistercian houses, their system of visitations by abbots of their motherhouses, and the call for yearly meetings or General Chapters, where monks would meet to decide collectively upon their order's legislation and governance. The document was subsequently revised during the early Cistercian period and may have reached a final form around the middle of the twelfth century.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (before 1273)—This massive statement of the whole of Christian theology is divided into three parts treating God, God's relations with humanity and humanity's relations with God, and Christ and the Sacraments. This work became the basis of medieval clerical education and is still recognized today for its system and clarity.

Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418)—This manual of spiritual devotion was written by an ascetical monk from the reform house of Zwolle, a daughter house of Windesheim. Thomas was influenced by the tradition of the Brethren of the Common Life and directed this work toward achievement of a life of spiritual perfection based upon the Christ as its model.

Urban II, *Clermont Sermon* (27 November 1095)—This is the speech that Pope Urban gave in support of the First Crusade at the Council of Clermont. There are actually five surviving versions of the speech, all of which put forth the principles and justification for crusading that would set the theological tone relied upon by churchmen in their promotion of subsequent campaigns.