

Panel: “Heresy, Inquisition, and the State”

Jessie Cortesi

Title: Authority and Orthodoxy: The Establishment of Catholic Temporal Power

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Suzanne LaVere

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Jessie Cortesi is a senior at IPFW. She is a History major and a Medieval Studies minor. She is currently working as the Assistant Book Review Editor for the journal of the Business History Conference, *Enterprise and Society*, an Oxford University Press quarterly. Together with Dr. Richard Weiner she is co-authoring an article on Andre Gunder Frank for publication in OUP’s forthcoming *Encyclopedia of World Poverty*. In addition, she was selected as one of this year’s Outstanding History Seniors.

Abstract

Religious persecution of “heretics” by the Catholic Church that characterizes the middle ages had its roots in power struggles centuries prior. In the first centuries of Christianity, Christians fought amongst themselves for interpretive and doctrinal authority. Heterodoxy didn’t stand a chance in the Middle Ages; in Late Antiquity nothing was certain. Everything changed when, in 380, Emperor Theodosius legally adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. A minority group that had once only held sway among its own, Christians were now in a position to influence the most powerful man and government in the world. Before long, bishops would rise to a higher station than the emperor himself. Previously, Christian officials wielded only religious authority, but after Theodosius’ Edict they would command temporal authority as well. It was not long before Theodosius’ commitment to rooting out wrong belief was put to the test; only five years later in 385 the first execution for heresy took place.

As Roman imperial rule waned in the west, the Catholic sphere of influence grew. In 410, with the imperial government safely retreated from the city, the Bishop of Rome was left to negotiate with invaders. Increasingly, the emperor in the west had little real power; the official seat of the Empire was in Constantinople. As Goths settled in Gaul and threatened Roman borders, Christian officials campaigned to bring these groups into the Catholic Church. The focus was different in the east where a powerful emperor still held sway. There, Christian leaders and their doctrinal interpretations remained inextricably tied to currents of politics and the will of the emperor. Gradually and over the course of many disputes, the eastern and western Christians drifted farther and farther apart in doctrine. In the west, the Bishop of Rome became inarguably more powerful than and more influential over the rulers of the kingdoms that arose after the fall of the empire. The changing role of bishops, the reservation of harshest punishments for those who relapsed from Catholicism, and the successful formation of a myth of unity despite the reality of faction are the critical factors from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages visible in shaping the development of widespread heretical persecution later in the medieval period.

Bibliographical Note

In the course of my research, the Fordham University website's Internet History Sourcebooks (Ancient and Medieval), proved to be a valuable resource of primary sources. *Gelasius I on Spiritual and Temporal Power, 494* is quoted from the Fordham Medieval Sourcebook. The Oxford University Press collection *Documents of the Early Church* (Oxford, 1999) was a fruitful resource for Church documents. I referenced a wide variety of works among secondary sources; a few of the most frequently cited were David Foster's *Early Christian Thinkers* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2010), Peter Iver Kaufman's *Church, Book, and Bishop: Conflict and Authority in Early Latin Christianity* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), and Raymond Van Dam's *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). R.A. Markus is quoted on Donatism from his *Christianity in the Roman World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974).