



42: What Was the Great Schism?

Confusingly, what historians call the 'Great Schism' had no direct connection with either the Catholic-Orthodox split or the Reformation. It had its origins in the claim of the mediaeval Papacy to supremacy over the secular power, as embodied in the Holy Roman Emperor, whose dominions included most of what is now Germany, the Low Countries, eastern France, Switzerland, Austria, and northern Italy.

Between 1194 and 1250 the Empire included also southern Italy and Sicily, effectively 'squeezing' the Papal States around Rome and Ravenna. The Popes set themselves, diplomatically, to break the power of the Empire in Italy and exterminate the Imperial House of Hohenstaufen. Eventually they succeeded, but in order to do this they effectively placed themselves in the power of the Kings of France.

Pope Boniface VIII, elected in 1294, attempted to reassert the power of the Papacy. He argued that St Peter's words in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Look, we have two swords', and Jesus' reply, 'It is enough', meant that the Popes, as successors to St Peter, were invested by Christ with the two swords both of spiritual and of temporal power. Kings and Emperors, therefore, must obey the Pope.

This led eventually to a clash with King Philip IV of France. In 1303, Philip sent a 'snatch squad' of agents to kidnap the Pope from his palace at Anagni in Italy with the intention of bringing him to France to stand trial for heresy and other crimes. Boniface, a sick man, was rescued but died soon afterwards.

His successors declined to move to Rome, which was now in a state of permanent anarchy. For sixty years, the seat of the Papacy was Avignon, on the Rhone, where the magnificent palace of the Popes still stands. The administration of the Western Church was centralised there, and was extremely efficient by the standards of the time, but it was also very expensive. This made the Church increasingly unpopular - people resented having to pay fees to an organisation that was seen as being in the pocket of the French king. (The Hundred Years' War between England and France broke out at this time.) This period was called the 'Babylonian Captivity' of the Church.

In 1376, Pope Gregory XI moved back to Rome. He died two years later. The citizens of Rome rioted

against the election of another Frenchman, who they feared would move back to Avignon. The Archbishop of Bari was elected and took the name Urban VI. He turned out to have a violent and ungovernable temper, and made life intolerable for most of the cardinals, all but three of whom retired to Anagni. There they declared Urban's election invalid and chose Cardinal Robert of Geneva, a Frenchman, as Pope (Clement VII). He moved back to Avignon, but Urban refused to step down, and nominated new cardinals in place of the dissidents.

This was the beginning of the Great Schism, which lasted from 1378 to 1417. No issue of principle or doctrine divided the two Popes. Avignon was recognised in France, Spain, Scotland, Southern Italy and Sicily; most of the rest of Catholic Europe, including England, recognised Rome. The schism was not ended when Urban and Clement died, because the cardinals who supported each of them elected a successor. The rivals both deplored this disunity and declared that they were willing to step down if only the other would as well; but neither was prepared to be the first to give way.

Eventually, in 1409, the cardinals, who by this time had realised the damage the schism was doing to the Church, on their own authority summoned a Council to meet at Pisa. This deposed both rivals and elected a new Pope, Alexander V. Rome and Avignon ignored the Council, so there were now three popes instead of two.

Eventually, international diplomacy and a lull in the Hundred Years' War enabled another Council to meet at Constance in Germany in 1415. Pope Gregory XII of Rome resigned, and Benedict XIII of Avignon was deposed. John XXIII of Pisa, successor to Alexander, was declared an anti-pope and promoter of schism - which seems unfair but is why Cardinal Roncalli of Venice took office as John XXIII. After much argument, an Italian, Odo Colonna, was elected as no majority could be found for any other candidate. He became Pope Martin V and the Great Schism was over. But it had caused many problems that were still unresolved.