

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COSMOS

By Sue Toohey (2005)

Plato once said that mortal humans were prevented from hearing the Harmony of the Spheres by the grossness of their bodily senses.¹ The Christian Platonists believed that they lost that faculty with the Fall.² That astrology came from the fallen angels was a widespread belief in the early years of the Church. Paul identifies the fallen angels with the heathen gods; the Old Testament stories of Saul and the witch, and of the Egyptian magicians, were cited as proof that they were concerned with occult arts.³ It was this argument that was used in the Church's attempts to prohibit the use of astrology by asserting that it could only be accomplished through the aid of demons.⁴

The problem with this, of course, was that it suggested demons could read the stars. This posed the question of how the demons could read the stars unless God's will was written there? If there were signs, as the Bible tells us in several places, how do we distinguish between a prediction through the help of evil spirits, and one sanctioned by God?⁵ In this paper, I will explore the ideas of many individuals who combated the potential paradoxes in their faith. I will examine some of their ideas, as well as the potential difficulties that many of them faced from the possible condemnation of the Church. I also challenge the idea that astrologers always faced the risk of persecution from the Church, suggesting that when persecution did take place, or when official edicts were pronounced, other factors were usually involved.

¹ Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers. A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe* (London: Arkana, 1989), p.87.

² Ibid.

³ Theodore Otto Wedel, *Astrology in the Middle Ages* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), p. 16.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Early Christian Commentators

Many Fathers of the early Christian Church faced the dilemma of how to contend with the apparent authenticity of astrology while denying its efficacy. Tertullian, for example, does not appear to argue against the validity of astrology but rather the use of it, particularly since the arrival of Christ. He argued that it was the fallen angels who had taught astrology, and warns that Christians would do well to reject them and their notions.

There does not appear to be any serious challenge to the validity of astrology itself among early Christians. The tendency was to attack the practises of astrology, usually on religious grounds, without questioning its validity. To believe that astrology works was one thing. It was a very different matter to use it. The biggest threat from astrology, as far as many Christians were concerned, came from the doctrine of fate and free will. This issue would arise persistently throughout the centuries as an argument against the use of astrology.⁶ Few writers condemned astrology outright and many made several qualifications on their attacks admitting that certain parts of astrology were valid and acceptable. However, the idea that astrology inhibited the free will of a person was a crucial element in the fight against its acceptance by the Church.

Augustine

Perhaps the most well known antagonist towards astrology in the early centuries, Augustine was one of the first Christians to argue at length about astrology and its relationship with the doctrines of Christianity. His large volume, *City of God*, became one of the foremost works on which many writers based their arguments; either in accord with what had been argued or denying its legitimacy. According to Wedel, these arguments had been handed down, largely unchanged, from Carneades (135BCE -50BCE).⁷ This work of Carneades is no longer extant but the ideas have been preserved in the works of other writers - Cicero's *De Divinatione* (On Divination) and Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* (City of God).⁸ Laistner also points to the same arguments being handed down since Carneades, citing Boll who also expressed similar views.⁹

⁶ Note from D. Houlding: Sue Toohey discusses the issue of fate and free will more extensively (particularly within medieval Christian theology) in her article *And let them be for signs Albertus Magnus and Prognostication by the Stars*, available online at www.skyscript.co.uk/magnus.html. This paper, and the ideas presented in that article, were originally prepared as two successive chapters in a work submitted for a masters thesis, so that some of the concepts discussed here are elaborated further in that article.

⁷ Ibid., p.6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ M.L.W. Laistner, "The Western Church and Astrology During the Early Middle Ages," *Harvard Theological Review* 34, no 4, 1941, p. 256.

In the fifth book of *City of God*, Augustine argues that astrology is a fatalistic science. He maintains that the actions of man are free from the arbitrary rule of the stars. However, Wedel argues that it soon becomes clear that his purpose is only that of replacing astrological fatalism by an even more stringent deterministic doctrine—the theory of predestination and divine foreknowledge.¹⁰ Augustine reserved an even greater disdain for those who he saw as denying any divination at all. He mentions Cicero by name, claiming that in denying the possibility of divination, he denied the existence of God. This is even less tolerable than believing in knowledge of the stars.

Cicero tries hard to refute those philosophers, while realizing that he cannot make head against them without abolishing divination. He tries to get rid of it by denying the existence of knowledge of the future. He uses his best efforts to establish the utter impossibility of such knowledge and of any prediction of events, whether in man or in God. Thus he denies the foreknowledge of God, as well as trying to demolish every prophecy, even though it is clearer than daylight. He does this by spurious arguments, and by setting up as targets certain easily refutable oracles, which, however, he fails to invalidate, although in his exposure of the conjectures of astrologers, his eloquence carries all before it. The fact is that such guesswork is self-destructive and self-refuting. Yet the theory that the stars decide destiny is much more tolerable than the attempt to get rid of all knowledge of the future. To acknowledge the existence of God, while denying him any prescience of events, is the most obvious madness.¹¹

It appears that divination is acceptable in the eyes of Augustine as long as it is God's divination. Not only is astrology not God's divination, it is the divination of demons. After attempting to destroy astrology as a legitimate art, he ends by accepting the possibility of astrological predictions, but only with the help of demons.

When one ponders all this, one has some justification for supposing that when astrologers give replies that are often surprisingly true, they are inspired, in some mysterious way, by spirits, but spirits of evil, whose concern is to instil and confirm in men's minds those false and baneful notions about 'astral destiny'. These true predictions do not come from skill in the notation and inspection of horoscopes; that is a spurious art.¹²

By admitting this, Augustine was reiterating the arguments of earlier Church Fathers, Tertullian and Lactantius, who believed that the fallen angels were responsible for this attempt to cheat humankind.¹³

¹⁰ Wedel, *Astrology in the Middle Ages*, p. 22.

¹¹ Augustine, *City of God* (London: Penguin, 2003), bk 5, ch. 9.

¹² Ibid., bk 5, ch. 7.

¹³ Wedel, *Astrology in the Middle Ages*, p. 23.

Many of Augustine's opinions betray a lack of astrological knowledge or understanding, leaving the arguments weak and unsupported by reason. At one point in *City of God* he suggests that the stars give notice of events and do not bring those events about. The position of the stars becomes a kind of statement, predicting, not producing, future happenings and this has been 'an opinion held by men of respectable intelligence.'¹⁴ This is a reasonable argument and one that was often proposed by astrologers themselves. However, Augustine insisted that this is not the way that astrologers normally talk. Most astrologers, argued Augustine, would not say that the position of Mars, for example signifies murder but that the position of Mars causes murder.¹⁵ By this argument, it appears that he was validating the legitimacy of astrology to a certain extent but only in so far as it reflects what may happen and does not cause what will happen. This is a fine line that many Church Fathers walked in the early centuries of Christianity and one that often contradicted other beliefs. Although Augustine believed that it was the fallen angels who brought astrology to humankind, it was God who was the prime mover of all. If there were any signs to be revealed, it was God who chose to reveal them.

Christian Beliefs; Pagan Ideals.

By the fourth century, Christianity had been firmly established and was a growing religion. However, many of the earlier pagan beliefs, now considered to be incompatible with Christian thought, were still being reflected in the writings of Church Fathers. Synesius of Cyrene (c.373CE-c.414CE), contemporary of Augustine, and fellow African, commonly used the language of the Neoplatonist even after becoming a Christian.¹⁶ He was friend and student to Hypatia (c.335-415), a Neoplatonist astrologer and mathematician who was murdered by a fanatical Christian mob in 415CE.¹⁷ Despite becoming Bishop around 410CE, Synesius had great faith in astrology, writing often about the presence of astrological imagery. Like most people of the time, he characterised comets as fatal omens and as harbingers of the worst disasters, also explaining the concept of cycles, and that history repeats itself by the periodical return to their former positions of the stars which govern life.¹⁸ Synesius declared that astronomy, besides being itself a noble science, prepared men for the diviner mysteries of theology.¹⁹

¹⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, bk 5. ch. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Macrobius, *Commentary of the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl, *Records of Western Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 8.

¹⁷ For a complete account of Hypatia's life see Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). (Additional note by D. Houlding: For Sue Toohey's own account of the 'Important Life and Tragic Death of Hypatia', see her online article at www.skyscript.co.uk/hypatia.html).

¹⁸ Lynn Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, 1-8 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), vol 1, p. 543.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Macrobius

Macrobius, who was born in the latter part of the fourth century, is best known for two titles, *Saturnalia* and *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. Details of his background are sketchy, although there is a Macrobius mentioned in a number of high government positions around this time. It is unlikely that a pagan would have held the offices mentioned yet there is no evidence to indicate that this author was a Christian.²⁰ In *Saturnalia*, he presents speakers who were leading opponents of Christianity at that time, revealing his admiration for them and showing a strong interest in pagan deities. In *Commentary*,²¹ he presents as a devout follower of Neoplatonism and there is not a single reference to Christianity in this or any of his other works. Glover believes that the failure of Macrobius to mention Christianity is quite significant. Being a contemporary of Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom and Theodosius, he must have known about Christianity but chose to ignore it as his way of showing displeasure at its victory.²² However, whether it is the same Macrobius or not, the title attached to his name in the manuscripts is one that is reserved for the highest ranking. The holder of such a high rank during the later years of Honorius' reign would have to be a Christian.²³

The fact that Macrobius failed to mention Christianity, and his continual reference to pagan beliefs, does not necessarily indicate that he was not a Christian at the time he wrote his works. Paganism died very slowly throughout the Empire. As we have already seen with Synesius, it was possible to be a Christian and still exhibit a strong pagan philosophy in writings. Augustine was another writer who was obviously Christian but was strongly influence by Neoplatonism. However, unlike Macrobius, Augustine was writing expressly about Christianity. There is no reason to expect Macrobius to mention Christianity in books whose subject matter is specifically related to other matters.

Firmicus Maternus

Another writer who has inspired debate about whether or not he was a Christian was the astrologer Firmicus Maternus. Firmicus also lived during the 4th century but was perhaps better known during the later part of the Middle Ages. He was the author of two books, *The Error of Profane Religions* (commonly known as *De errore*) and *Mathesis*,²⁴ two books that are considerably different in their subject matter. This confused scholars for a long time and it was once thought that the two books may have been written by two different authors. This belief was later abandoned and

²⁰ Macrobius, *Commentary of the Dream of Scipio*, p. 7.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁴ Lynn Thorndike, "A Roman Astrologer as a Historical Source: Julius Firmicus Maternus," *Classical Philology* Vol 8, 4, 1913, p. 417.

subsequently replaced by the theory that Firmicus was a pagan when he wrote his astrological book and converted to Christianity sometime before he wrote his polemic against pagan religions.²⁵ In his history of the early church, Chadwick adopts the belief that Firmicus converted to Christianity sometime after 335CE.

About 346, converted senator, Firmicus Maternus, who in 335, before his conversion, had composed a remarkable Latin encyclopedia of astrological information, wrote a vigorous tract especially attacking the Oriental mystery cults, but extending his scorn also to the Vestal cult at Rome and the domestic shrines of household gods. He concluded with an urgent request to the emperors for a root and branch suppression of paganism.²⁶

While Chadwick does not mention either book by name, it may be assumed that he is referring to *Mathesis* and *De errore*.

Thorndike argues that there is no clear evidence either way as to which book was written first. He sees Boll's assertion that there is no question that he was a pagan when he wrote his book on astrology to be overconfident.²⁷ Most people have assumed that *Mathesis* was written before converting to Christianity and *De errore* was written after converting. In her introduction to the translation of *Mathesis*, Jean Rhys Bram argues that *Mathesis* came first, and that the bitter attack on the mystery religions to be found in *De errore* was written from a Christian point of view.²⁸ Yet it is clear that this book contains no positive Christian doctrine. While Bram may see *De errore* as being from the Christian point of view, it was not necessary to be a Christian in order to attack the mystery religions. It cannot be assumed that an attack on the mystery religions can be automatically established as being in support of the Christian viewpoint. Firmicus does not attack astrology at all in *De errore*, suggesting that, even if he is a Christian, he does not feel that astrology is particularly incompatible with Christian belief.²⁹

If Firmicus did undergo a conversion to Christianity at some stage, he does not make this clear in his writings. Augustine, on the other hand, went to great lengths to express his disapproval of astrology after converting from Manichaeism to Christianity, explaining that he once accepted the doctrine of astrology but now realises his mistake. In his autobiographical book, *Confessions*, Augustine reveals that he used to consult astrologers until he saw the error of his ways. He argues that true Christian piety rightly rejects and condemns what they do.

²⁵ For a full account of this debate see Lynn Thorndike's abovementioned article or Bram's introduction in her translation of Firmicus Maternus, *Ancient Astrology Theory and Practice. Matheseos Libri Viii*, trans. Jean Rhys Bram (Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1975).

²⁶ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, ed. Owen Chadwick, Revised ed., vol. 1, *The Penguin History of the Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 153.

²⁷ Thorndike, "Firmicus Maternus," p. 418.

²⁸ Maternus, *Mathesis*, p. 1.

²⁹ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, vol 1. p. 528.

This truth is our whole salvation, but the astrologers try to do away with it. They tell us that the cause of sin is determined in the heavens and we cannot escape it, and that this or that is the work of Venus or Saturn or Mars.³⁰

No such argument can be found in the writings of Firmicus. According to Thorndike, Firmicus met the criteria that should satisfy Christian objections towards astrology. He provides not only for divine government of the universe and creation of the world and man, but also for prayer to God and for human free will, since by the divinity of the soul we are able to resist in some measure the decrees of the stars.³¹

However, Thorndike, in *History of Medieval Europe*, identifies Firmicus as a Western Christian apologist who addresses the emperors as 'most sacred emperors', setting them above the rest of mankind and associating them with the celestial bodies and 'the supreme God' at the same time that he urges eradication of the pagan cults.³²

Firmicus was widely read by astrologers, including those of the Church. However, this was not always met with approval. Archbishop Gerard of York was said to have died in 1108 with the astrology book of Firmicus Maternus under his pillow.³³ This was enough to warrant the refusal of the canons to bury him in the cathedral, although this was later relinquished by a successor.³⁴

The Early Middle Ages

Laistner warns students of the early Middle Ages that they would fall into serious error if they were to assume that such beliefs as astrology were confined to the uneducated masses.³⁵ In fact, what is true is that such thinking was universally accepted. 'For what other conclusion is possible, when we find them among educated Churchmen from the fifth to the ninth century?'³⁶ Even those who did not accept astrology found it difficult to ignore it. A story told by Sidonius (c.430- c.480), Christian writer and Bishop of Clermont, tells of a murdered man whose fate was foretold by astrologers. After expressing his disapproval of astrology, Sidonius adds;

'it must be admitted that in the present case there was neither appearance of mere conjecture nor deliberate ambiguity; death enmeshed our reckless inquirer into the future exactly when and as it had been foretold; all his shifts to evade it were in vain.'³⁷

³⁰ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (England: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 73.

³¹ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, p. 531.

³² Lynn Thorndike, *History of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1917), p. 106.

³³ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, vol 2, p. 689. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 435. Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (London: Boydell Press, 1987), p. 132.

³⁴ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, vol 2, p. 690.

³⁵ Laistner, "The Western Church and Astrology," p. 270.

³⁶ Ibid.,

³⁷ Ibid.,

Gregory of Tours (538-594), who also expresses his disapproval of astrology, shows remarkable knowledge and application of astrological processes particularly as it related to timekeeping. Bede condemned astrology but wrote of the Ages of time and accepted certain things regarding lunar influences on respecting the right and wrong time in the month to perform agricultural operations.³⁸

The reasons put forward for the rejection of astrology rarely came from a genuine understanding of the argument and were largely built on a false premise. Lindsay argues that there was no consistent position among Christians. They were often against astrology in that it put natural law in the place of God. However, they were frequently prepared to accept the stars as the signs of God, therefore, in some sense, signalling his thoughts and decisions.³⁹

The works of Isidore of Seville were widely read in the Middle Ages. Differentiating between two aspects of astrology, he admonished those who deal in what he refers to as the superstitious variety. Superstitious astrology, according to Isidore, is that which is pursued by the mathematici who augur the future from the stars, assign the parts of the soul and body to the signs of the zodiac, and try to predict the nativities and characters of men from the course of the stars.⁴⁰ Such superstitions 'are without doubt contrary to our faith; Christians should so ignore them that they shall not even appear to have been written.'⁴¹ However, Isidore asserts that it is not superstitious to want to know the nature of things as long as they are considered from a reasonable doctrine. He describes man as a microcosm, and, like most ecclesiastical writers, no matter how hostile they generally might be to astrology, is ready to assert that comets signify political revolutions, wars and pestilences.⁴²

Later Middle Ages

As has already been demonstrated, not all members of the clergy disapproved of astrology and the clerical practitioner was not an unusual figure. There were several attacks by Church Fathers based on the belief that astrology brought into question the freedom of will. St Augustine's *City of God* had impressed the idea in many minds that astrology and Christianity were especially incompatible. However, a high level of acceptance was found among Church people of the Middle Ages.

Like many Church men, Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420) had to contend with opposing traditions about astrology. D'Ailly worked hard to find a compromise, a way to preserve both celestial influences and human free will.⁴³ His primary goal was to

³⁸ Ibid.,

³⁹ Jack Lindsay, *Origins of Astrology* (London: Fredrick Muller Ltd, 1971), p. 396.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, p. 632.

⁴² Ibid., p. 633.

⁴³ Laura Ackerman Smoller, *History, Prophecy and the Stars. The Christian Astrology of Pierre D'ailly, 1350-1420*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 25.

establish a boundary between matters of astrological speculation and matters of faith. He sought to find an essential harmony between his astrological beliefs and his theological beliefs, one that neither contradicted Christian teachings nor detracted from the power of astrology.⁴⁴ His defence of astrology reflected the central importance of God's omnipotence in his theology. His research into astrology often included an attempt to define the role of the stars in the development of religion. He termed astrology 'natural theology'.⁴⁵

Like d'Ailly, Ficino, priest and philosopher of the early Renaissance period, sought to reconcile his Christian beliefs with his respect for the ancient philosophies, including astrology. He maintained that the stars, if they do influence the body, have no compulsive power over the soul. However, Ficino's life was overshadowed by his fear of Saturn.⁴⁶ According to Ficino, we cannot choose our star; ⁴⁷ therefore, we are unable to choose our physical and moral nature as well as our temperament. Nonetheless, we are free to exercise our choice within the limits of what is prescribed by the star under which we were born. Although every star contains a diversity of different, even paradoxical, possibilities it leaves the final choice open to the will.⁴⁸ Saturn, for example, is not only the demon of inertia and of unproductive self-indulgent melancholy; it is also the genius of scholarly observation and consideration, of intelligence and contemplation.⁴⁹ This binary opposition, which is to be found in the stars themselves, discovers its identification and its clearest and most visible expression within the scheme of astrology. It is this recognition that clears the way for free will.⁵⁰

Although Ficino would often have to defend his involvement in astrology, he did so without apology. In a letter to Rinaldo Orsini, Archbishop of Florence, Ficino wrote that many people might find it curious for a priest to be interested in such matters.

People will perhaps laugh at a priest who heeds astronomy. But I, relying on the authority of the Persians, Egyptians, and Chaldeans, considered that while earthly matters were indeed the concern of others, heavenly matters in truth were the sole concern of the priest; so that while human affairs might be left to human counsel, matters for supreme authority should be referred to the ruler of heaven.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods - the Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, trans. Barbara F. Sessions, *Bollingen Series Xxcviii* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 60.

⁴⁷ Melissa Meriam Bullard, "The Inward Zodiac: A Development in Ficino's Thought on Astrology," *Renaissance Quarterly* 43, 4 (Winter), 1990, p. 112.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

⁵⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p.112.

⁵¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Epistolae - the Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. London Language Department of the School of Economic Science, 6 vols. (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975-1999), vol 2, letter 10.

As a recipient of the patronage of the de Medici family, Ficino drew the horoscopes of the children of Lorenzo de Medici, promising the young Giovanni that he would one day become pope.⁵² Indeed, as Ficino predicted, the young Giovanni grew up to become the somewhat infamous Pope Leo X.⁵³

Church Women

Although the Church was dominated by men, women too joined religious orders in large numbers during the Middle Ages, often spending their lives in isolation. It is unusual to find examples of writings from these women but not all of them were silent. Through the writings of a number of women it can be seen that Church men were not the only ones to display a dedicated interest in astrology. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), known as 'Sybil of the Rhine', often condemned astrology in her writing, calling mathematici 'deadly instructors and followers of the Gentiles in unbelief.'⁵⁴ However, she wrote extensively on subjects including medicine and cosmology and some of her writings are remarkably astrological in their content. She wrote at length on the four humours and on the temperaments of people according to the phase of the Moon in which they were conceived. For example, a woman conceived on the eighteenth day would have health and longevity but with a predisposition toward insanity, and she would be a cunning liar, causing the death of honourable men.⁵⁵ All of her cosmological convictions centre on the doctrine of the microcosm/macrocosm that was popular at the time she was writing. Hildegard, like many great philosophers of the Middle Ages, developed a somewhat complicated cosmological structure of how she perceived the universe, something she revised in later years. Much of what she was writing was not new; her beliefs go back at least as far as Pythagoras. However, her interpretations and her conclusions were quite unique. Although sometimes condemning astrology she explains that sometimes, by divine permission, the stars are signs to men. Christ himself pointed out that there will be signs in the heavens.⁵⁶ But Hildegard, through her visions, expressed the belief that the stars brought no aid to Christ other than when they faithfully announced his incarnation; and that they were doing so through the dictates of God.⁵⁷

A near contemporary of Hildegard was Herrad of Landsberg (c.1145-c.1195). Herrad wrote *Hortus Deliciarum* (Garden of Delights), which was a book of religion, history, astronomy, geography, philosophy, natural history and medical botany.⁵⁸

⁵² Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p.328.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, vol. 2, p. 149.

⁵⁵ Margaret Alic, *Hypatia's Heritage* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 73.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Luke 21:25-26.

⁵⁷ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, vol. 2, p. 149.

⁵⁸ Alic, *Hypatia's Heritage*, p. 74.

Unlike Hildegard, however, Herrad was happy to quote from secular writers and her writings contain some remarkable ideas. Her work was comparable to that of Hildegard in many ways but Herrad had a much clearer way of explaining issues such as the temperaments. The work includes an illustration of the signs of the zodiac and a table for determining festival days.⁵⁹ Such tables were essential in the twelfth century and Herrad's was considered one of the best. She calculated the dates for Easter and the day of the week of Christmas Day for a cycle of 532 years, from 1175 to 1706.⁶⁰ This was an extraordinary achievement but one that is long forgotten by most people.

Official Sanctions

Although these Church people believed fully that astrology and Christianity were compatible, those who controlled the Church often saw it another way. The first recorded condemnation of astrology from the Church came at the Council of Laodocia in 364CE when Constantine declared;

They, who are of the priesthood, or of the clergy, shall not be magicians, enchanters, mathematicians, or astrologers; nor shall they make what are called amulets, which are chains for their own souls. And those who wear such, we command to be cast out of the Church.⁶¹

Barton states, however, that this was possibly a later interpolation.⁶² Tester states that a late Arabic version of the decrees of the Council of Nicaea includes a prohibition of astrology, but it is the only source for that council which does.⁶³ The Theodosian Code of the late 4th century was against all forms of divination and was not directed specifically at astrology. However, in 409, Honorius and Theodosius required all astrologers to burn their books in the presence of the bishops, on threat of exile.⁶⁴ In 425 astrologers, along with various heretics, found themselves subject to an expulsion decree.⁶⁵ Barton believes that the severity of these laws should not suggest that they were harshly enforced.⁶⁶ In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that astrologers stopped practising, nor were they punished severely. In 371, the astrologer Heliodorus turned state's evidence, revealing the plot against the emperor, Valens, in which he had been a consultant. Ammianus Marcellinus, the historian who records the rumour, says that Valens, apparently a fanatically Christian emperor, not only pardoned Heliodorus,

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶¹ *The Complete Canons of the Synod of Laodicea in Phrygia Pacatiana* ([cited 3rd June 2003]); available from <http://www.reluctant-messenger.com>.

⁶² Tamsyn Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 79.

⁶³ Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 55.

⁶⁴ Barton, *Ancient Astrology*, p. 65.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

but made him his own astrologer, bestowing on him a high office.⁶⁷ In an earlier incident in 70CE, the astrologer Ptolemy Seleucus, who had encouraged a revolt against the Emperor, was taken on as his personal astrologer by Vespasian.⁶⁸

This is not to say that there were no cases of condemnation. There are cases in the early history of the Church where severe punishments were meted out. In the fourth century, according to Epiphanius, an astrologer called Aquila refused to give up astrology after being converted to Christianity in 120CE and was thrown out of the Church for being unsuitable for salvation.⁶⁹ In 449, Bishop Sophronius of Constantina was put on trial for astrology and other divination by the Robber Council in Ephesus. The connection with heresy was said to be obvious. The bishop was believed to be a Nestorian, and the Council had been convened to suppress this heresy.⁷⁰ It seems likely in this case that the issue was not with astrology but with his identity as a Nestorian.

While there was often condemnation of astrology, it is necessary to distinguish between official condemnation levelled specifically against astrology and the efforts of the Church and its officers to combat various popular superstitions they considered to be pagan in origin. There is a paucity of evidence for official condemnation of astrology and copious material for the attempts to combat pagan practises, according to Laistner.⁷¹ The entire sixteenth book of the Theodosian Code is devoted to matters of religion. Orthodoxy is defined, and a long series of ordinances against Jews and heretics is collected. The tenth section contains enactments against paganism, its temples, its rites and sacrifices; yet there is not one mention of astrology. In the ninth book, however, which is concerned with criminal law, there are three brief entries. Two of them are aimed at suppressing practitioners of superstition and the third is directed solely at astrologers, which requires them to cease drawing up their charts.⁷² The case against astrologers in the Theodosian Code appears weak and virtually ineffectual.

The Sins of Many – The Punishment of One

It is often difficult to ascertain the real reason behind the persecution of those involved. It was a rare event and records were not always clear as to the reasons behind the condemnation. In 1327, Cecco d'Ascoli was burned at the stake. The persistent assumption that he was killed by the Inquisition for his astrological practices and that this was the reason for his demise appears quite unlikely.⁷³ Neither the medieval church, nor the Inquisition, were as anti astrology as is commonly

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 56.

⁷⁰ Barton, *Ancient Astrology*.

⁷¹ Laistner, "The Western Church and Astrology," p. 263.

⁷² Ibid., p. 264.

⁷³ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, vol 2, p. 968.

believed. The condemnation of Cecco, therefore, may be a good example of the way in which the Inquisition could be manipulated for private ends, but it does not seem a sign of any general attack by the Church and Inquisition on astrology. It is more likely that this was personal. Cecco was said to have been a difficult person who, unlike Dante who saved his attacks for the dead, would often direct his attacks at the living. This made him some powerful enemies and it is likely that this was a reason he met with this fate.

The charges repeated, or invented against Cecco appear to be dubious. According to Villani, he was found guilty by the Franciscan inquisitor of three heretical doctrines: First, that in the aerial spheres there existed malign spirits which could be constrained, by means of enchantments performed under certain constellations, to perform many marvellous things. Secondly, that he had ascribed a necessary influence to the heavens. Thirdly, that Christ's birth, poverty, and death had been according to the rule of the stars.⁷⁴ Two of the three charges are almost impossible to substantiate. None of the so-called heretical doctrines ascribed to Cecco were peculiar to him. Many astrologers prior to Cecco and those who came after published writings discussing the genealogy of Christ. None met such a fate. The first count, to which Wedel agrees Cecco is guilty, was a popular movement of the scientific magic which was spreading over Europe from the Orient, and which was making its first important home in Italy.⁷⁵ Cecco was merely a popular example of that movement and appears to have been singled out for other reasons.

Why Cecco d'Ascoli was burned at the stake is a problem that has perplexed historians, and none of the explanations offered is adequate. It seems, however, that if this was an attempt to prohibit his teachings then the process against Cecco was a failure as it simply advertised him and his writings.⁷⁶ This event came towards the end of the medieval period and there does not appear to be any evidence that there were others who met with this fate. Tester comments that by the end of the fourteenth century the courts of Europe, both lay and ecclesiastical, were 'fairly thickly strewn with astrologers.'⁷⁷ Gleadow says there is only one record of an astrologer being burned at the stake during this period; that of Cecco d'Ascoli.⁷⁸ He agrees with the assessment that it is more likely his persecution was due to personal enmity since his writings were no more offensive than other Church authorities such as Albertus Magnus and d'Ailly.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Wedel, *Astrology in the Middle Ages*, P. 76.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*.

⁷⁷ Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 196.

⁷⁸ Rupert Gleadow, *The Origin of the Zodiac* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1968), p. 47.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

It is difficult to reconcile what happened to Cecco with the apparent relaxed attitudes of the Church towards two of its most important members; Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. The attitudes towards astrology of these two men appear to be more characteristic of medieval ecclesiastical culture, according to Thorndike. These attitudes were well known to the Church. This same church canonised Aquinas and beatified Magnus. Everything tends to indicate that Cecco's execution was exceptional and sensational, but not an especially significant event. Writing in the eighteenth century, Tiraboschi expressed the view that envy had no small part in the condemnation of this unhappy astrologer and that he would not have perished so wretchedly if he had not had powerful enemies who conspired to his ruin.⁸⁰ Zambelli comments that astrologers who were condemned did not always show the sort of caution that was perhaps needed in order to escape the wrath of the Church; the sort of caution that was demonstrated by other astrologers such as Magnus and Bacon.⁸¹ However, these men did not appear to be especially cautious, writing extensively about their beliefs and speaking openly about them. What it does suggest, is that it was not a belief in astrology that would get you burned at the stake but rather something far more personal. Tester argues that, whatever the truth of it, it cannot now be known. Whatever the heresies in Cecco's attitudes and his comments, his astrology was very much in the late medieval tradition.⁸² Wedel explains the more likely reasons for Cecco's persecution;

Cecco d'Ascoli atoned for the sins of many; his death forms an almost isolated instance in the history of the Inquisition. The boldness of his utterances, his lack of official patronage, and the fact that he was exposed to the calumny of powerful rivals, subjected him to dangers from which lesser and greater men were exempt.⁸³

The Pope and the Heretic

In 1586, Pope Sixtus V issued a Papal Bull against those practising the art of judicial astrology.⁸⁴ This was in contrast to many of his predecessors who tolerated or even used astrology. This bull did not include a ban on prediction of future events which occur necessarily or frequently from natural causes, leaving open the use of natural astrology. It is not clear how closely this bull was adhered to. While many of the universities had ceased to teach astrology, the University of Padua continued teaching

⁸⁰ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*.

⁸¹ Paola Zambelli, *The Speculum Astronomiae and Its Enigma - Astrology, Theology and Science in Albertus Magnus and His Contemporaries*, ed. Robert S. Cohen, vol. 153, *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), p. 11.

⁸² Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, p. 196.

⁸³ Wedel, *Astrology in the Middle Ages*, p. 77.

⁸⁴ D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella* (Notre Dame, London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p. 105.

until the seventeenth century and the University of Salamanca was teaching astrology until the eighteenth century, long after the bull was announced.⁸⁵ Sixtus V had expressly permitted the use of astrology in medicine. Astrologer Magini printed his book after consultation with the Inquisitor and University of Padua. He determined that the Church condemned only superstitious Arabic astrology and nativities which impinge on human free will, but not the use of nativities in medicine to determine the condition of the patient.⁸⁶

The bull of 1586 was reaffirmed in 1631 by Urban VIII when an astrologer predicted the death of this pope. Urban was a believer in astrology and would often have horoscopes cast of the Cardinals resident in Rome. He was in the habit of openly predicting the dates of their deaths.⁸⁷ However, when people started predicting his own death, Urban was exasperated and moved to condemn the very practise in which he himself had partaken on a frequent basis.

There seems little doubt that the practise of predicting the pope's death was encouraged by the Spanish who were annoyed by the pope's persistently pro-French policies.⁸⁸ It seems clear by these events that the reaffirmation of the bull by Urban was purely personal and had nothing to do with his beliefs on astrology. Things came to a head when Father Morandi, as a result of astrological calculations and the fact that the pope would be in his 63rd year, or grand climacteric, came to the conclusion that Urban would die in 1630.⁸⁹ He submitted his calculations to three friends for verification or correction. The first two, Abbot Luigi Gherardi and Francesco Lamponi agreed with his calculations while the third, Father Raffaello Visconti, thought that, if the pope did not leave Rome, he would live until 1643 or 1644.⁹⁰ The view of Morandi prevailed, his prediction drawing various foreign cardinals, encouraged by the Spanish, to Rome in expectation of a conclave to elect Urban's successor. Campanella, who had spent a significant amount of time in prison for heresy, and was desperate to gain the pope's favour, offered his services to Urban and they are said to have engaged in some astrological activity connected with the prediction of the death of the pope. In diplomatic reports from Rome for 1628, there are several mentions of the pope and Campanella being locked away together.⁹¹ Some of the rituals are said to include the lighting of candles and torches to signify an upcoming eclipse, symbolising good planets to expel the influences of bad ones. They also drank astrologically distilled liquors. None of these rituals were especially unusual and it seems likely that

⁸⁵ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, vol 6. p. 165.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella*, p. 105.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 206.

⁸⁹ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, vol 7, p. 99.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella*, p. 206.

Campanella was following the rituals set down by Ficino in his *Three Books of Life*, more than a hundred years previously.⁹² Fortunately for Urban, but not so fortunately for Morandi, his prediction proved incorrect. The pope did not die at the predicted time⁹³ and despite his high standing in the church, Morandi was imprisoned in July, 1630, dying of fever in November that year. ⁹⁴ In April 1635, four years after the reaffirmation of the bull, Giacinto Cantini, nephew of Cardinal Felice Cantini, was decapitated for astrological predictions of the pope's death together with incantations, necromancy and sorcery. Two clergy were hanged and later burned, while five other friars were condemned to various terms in the galleys. ⁹⁵

Seventeenth Century – The Twilight Years

As the 17th century dawned the conflict with astrologers and the clergy become more pronounced. An interesting point about the Christian Church's response to astrology was that, like earlier centuries, there appeared to be little debate as to whether astrology worked. Most arguments by Church people centred on whether astrology should be used rather than whether it worked. The attacks against astrology were typically aimed, not at the fundamental principle that the heavens influenced the affairs of people, but at the practise of astrology. Astrologers argued that it was legitimate to give astrological explanations of the weather, health and the general predilections of individuals based on the influence of the heavens at birth. What were generally condemned during the seventeenth century were precise short-term predictions and attempts to calculate the nativities of the sovereign or Christ.⁹⁶

In his popular book, *'Religion and the Decline of Magic'*, Keith Thomas mentions several leading astrologers of the seventeenth century who were members of the clergy. William Bredon, vicar of Thornton was said to adhere strictly to Ptolemy and was reluctant to set figures on a Sunday, while Richard Napier, Rector of Great Linford, was a pupil of Simon Foreman and, according to William Lilly, instructed many other ministers in the practices of astrology. He is believed to have said prayers before drawing a chart and prayed over every patient.⁹⁷

Many clergymen believed that astrology and religion offered conflicting explanations for such things as storms, famines, plagues, etc. While they believed them to be manifestations of God's secret purpose, astrologers made them subject to the movement of the celestial bodies and therefore predictable. In 1653 Presbyterian

⁹² Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. Carol V. Kaske; John R. Clark (Tempe: Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002). Campanella was known to be a follower of Ficino's astrology and there are similar rituals described throughout this work, particularly in the third book.

⁹³ Morandi should have listened to the prediction of Visconti. Urban did die in 1644, the year that Visconti had predicted fourteen years previously.

⁹⁴ Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, vol 7, p. 100.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Peter Wright, "Astrology and Science in Seventeenth-Century England," *Social Studies of Science* 5, 1975, p. 404.

⁹⁷ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 450.

minister Thomas Gataker said that it was essential that Christians should regard all events, not with an astrological, but a theological eye.⁹⁸ According to the clergy, God alone controls these things.

What is most striking in some of the attacks on astrology is the implication that the subject is not dangerous because it is false, but because it is a subversive truth. Archbishop Laud, for example, believed that fervent prayer could overcome even the dire effects of a conjunction of Saturn and Mars since God was able to hinder malign aspects and overrule conjunctions.⁹⁹ Another preacher told the Society of Astrologers that planetary influences might always be countered by genuine religious belief.¹⁰⁰ The difficulty was when people turned to astrology to resolve issues rather than to the Church. This posed a direct threat to the moral supremacy of the Church.

Yet the preachers feared that the vogue for astrology might lead to the replacement of the Christian God by the planetary divinities of classical antiquity, whose memory was preserved in the names of the months and the days of the week. Astrology, they recalled, had begun as a religion rather than a science, and the Bible contained warnings against star-worship. The celestial bodies were eternal, universal and allegedly omnipotent; might not their contemplation turn into a sort of mystical communion? Had not the heretical Priscillianists of the fourth century worshipped the stars as divine?¹⁰¹

One of the complaints from the clergy was that astrological prophecies were often studied more than the Bible. Perhaps this should not have been surprising. In England, an act of Parliament passed in 1543 restricted a woman's right to read the Bible. Only aristocratic women were allowed to read the sacred texts in private, merchant class women could do so only in the company of men, and lower-class women, along with lower class men, were banned from private reading altogether.¹⁰² No such restriction was placed on the reading of astrological almanacs. Some, the Church argued, gave more credit to judicial astrology than God's word, putting more confidence in the works of William Lilly than in God. Lilly (1602-1681) was one of England's best known astrologers of the seventeenth century, particularly in the area of interrogations (referred to by Lilly as horary questions). His clients often came for help of a practical nature, including such things as seeking lost items. Puritan preacher William Perkins felt that it was better that someone should lose their goods entirely than to retrieve them by astrological help.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 433.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 455.

¹⁰² M. Wertheim, *Pythagoras' Trousers: God, Physics, and the Gender Wars* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), p. 89.

¹⁰³ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 434.

While there were those who warned against the dangers of astrology, others simply ridiculed it. Thomas More, in his novel *Utopia*, explains that the Utopians were great experts in astronomy.¹⁰⁴ 'But as for astrology – friendships and quarrels between the planets, fortune-telling by the stars, and all the rest of that humbug – they've never even dreamt of such a thing.'¹⁰⁵ Dante even saw fit to include astrologer Bonatti in the 8th circle of hell.¹⁰⁶ Some astrologers were pleased with the way the church attacked astrology, or at least pleased with the way they benefited from its unexpected outcome. Joseph Blagrove, writing in 1671, said;

The truth is, after the ministers had preached against me and my art, I had twice so much custom as I had before, for they could not have done me better service, for many which before had not heard of me made much enquiring after me, hearing what great cures I had done. ¹⁰⁷

Attempts to curb the art of astrology were largely ineffectual and several leading astrologers had been given Episcopal licences authorising them to practice medicine like any other orthodox practitioner. This enabled the astrological practitioner to continue practicing astrology as part of the normal medical tradition. Lilly was one of the beneficiaries of this initiative having been granted his licence by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Heavenly Spheres

It is perhaps difficult to fully appreciate the depth of commitment that individuals of the past displayed in their endeavours to find an accurate and sympathetic understanding of God's creation through their study of the stars. The signs were there; the question was how best to interpret them. Many argued that God did not intend for humankind to read the stars and that those who did were in league with the devil. But others believed that from the very earliest times, God (or the gods) had been intimately connected with cosmology. It was only by studying God's plans in his expressions of nature that they could come to know him intimately. For this purpose, God had presented humankind with these signs. It was up to humankind to understand them in the way that he intended. The most controversial of all concepts in regard to astrology was the notion of free will. God had given humankind the ability to choose one's fate. Yet, to many, astrology implied that this fate was fixed. It was this concept that remained uppermost in the philosophical battle between the Church and the astrologer.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 71. Turner, in his explanatory notes, says that the original wording was 'experts in the course of the stars and the motion of the celestial spheres.'

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa, 3 vols., vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1984), Canto XX, 118-120, p. 255.

¹⁰⁷ Joseph Blagrove, *Astrological Practice of Physick*, p. 117.