

Conference on Rituals, Mathematics and the Astral sciences

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Calendar Reform in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: Problems and Perspectives

Abstract – For most of its history in medieval and early modern Europe, the issue of calendar improvement and reform was closely tied to the celebration of Easter and the structure of the liturgical year. A fixed point in most debates of this kind were the writings of the church fathers and the decrees of the late antique church councils, which had established a firm link between the date of Easter and astronomical criteria – the full moon and the vernal equinox. Astronomical accuracy thus became a fundamental requirement, which the medieval ecclesiastical calendar was supposed to fulfil in theory, but failed to meet in practice. My talk will use the theological and legal background of Easter reckoning as a starting point to analyze the parameters and constraints that shaped the debate surrounding the ecclesiastical calendar in the late Middle Ages, focusing in particular on sources produced at the court of Pope Clement VI in Avignon (1344/45) and at the Council of Basel (1434-43). Special attention will be paid to the way these sources frame the relationship between religious ritual, on the one hand, and astronomical data, on the other, as well as to the general points of intersection between the Easter problem and the history of astronomy in this period. It will be argued that the criteria established in the course of these late medieval debates remained normative throughout the subsequent history leading up to the Gregorian calendar reform of 1582.