

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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July 15, 2005
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Christian Culture Again: How Christian

Were the Middle Ages?

In an earlier article I suggested that the civilization of the medieval West was imbued with Christian ideals, and that those ideals were abandoned after the Enlightenment. This assertion provokes several challenges in the popular mind, two of which are particularly significant. The first is that the civilization of medieval Europe was Roman Catholic and, therefore, from a biblical perspective it was not truly Christian at all. The second objection is that the thought of medieval Europe was so influenced by pagan philosophers that the Christian elements were greatly diluted.

To take the second objection first, the primary non-Christian philosopher who influenced medieval theology was Aristotle. His thought was mediated through the theology of Thomas Aquinas, who wrote some 800 years after the beginning of the Middle Ages. Even Thomas did not appropriate Aristotle uncritically, and others (Bonaventure, for example) sharply opposed the use of Aristotelian categories. To be sure, Aristotle did exert an influence, especially during the late medieval period. People who study medieval philosophy, theology, or culture, however, rarely claim that the most influential categories in the medieval West came from pagan philosophers.

What about medieval Catholicism? Two considerations are worth pointing out. First, Catholicism during the Middle Ages was actually a mishmash of competing influences and ideas. Some critics of Romanism habitually confuse medieval Catholicism with Tridentine Catholicism, but this is a significant historical mistake. The trends that the Catholic church

canonized at Trent did develop during the Middle Ages. Most of the time, however, those trends had to compete with other perspectives and influences within broad Catholicism.

The strength of those competing influences can be illustrated by the success of the evangelical protest movements such as the Arnoldists, Waldenses, and Lollards. Unlike the truly heretical movements (the Cathari and Bogomils, for example), the evangelical groups were launched by emphases that they found within institutional Catholicism. There was a fine line between those who ended up outside the Catholic church and some of those who stayed in. Writers like Groote, Tauler, and Thomas à Kempis managed to preserve several evangelical emphases inside the medieval Catholic church. These evangelical influences ultimately led to the Reformation, a movement that began *within* the medieval Catholic church. So strong were the evangelical influences within medieval Catholicism that even the Counter-Reformation could not extirpate them. Remnants of the older, evangelical influences survived in people like Fenelon and Guyon.

In any event, the term *Christian* is used in more than one sense. In the strict and proper sense, it applies only to those who affirm all the fundamentals of the Faith, including the imputation of Christ's righteousness and justification through faith alone. In this sense, the Roman church of today is not a Christian church and most medieval Catholics were probably not Christian either. In a less technical sense, however, the word *Christian* can be used to distinguish those who affirm Trinitarian orthodoxy from infidels, pagans, and cultists. In that sense Catholicism can be called *Christian*, and that is the sense in which the Middle Ages were influenced by Christian categories.

To claim that medieval Western culture was shaped by Christian ideals is simply to assert that the categories in which people thought reflected certain ideals that came from Christianity. Almost no one doubts that the civilization of the medieval West was profoundly influenced by Christianity. Even where some superstition from the ancient paganisms remained, Christian categories came to dominate. The result was a synthesis of ideas that could rightly be called a Christian consensus. This consensus was shared by all classes: by clergy and laity, by statesmen, merchants, artists, and peasants.

The medieval consensus affirmed the existence of a personal-infinite God. This God, acknowledged as the Creator of the world, was both transcendent and immanent. He took a continuing interest in His creation. He ruled over and intervened in the course of history, either by miracle or by Providence.

Medievals saw the universe as an ordered place. This order was thought to be transcendentally imposed from the mind of the Creator. The universe was also governed by moral categories, because God's order included His moral law. Since God is just, violation of His law was thought to bring retribution.

Medievals viewed human beings as sinful, finite, and contingent. They understood that they needed divine help and forgiveness. Their recognition of human limitation and flaw, however, was balanced by a vision of human dignity based upon the *imago dei*.

Westerners during the Middle Ages believed that Jesus Christ was the God-man. They confessed Him to be the unique revealer of the Father: "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God." They worshiped Him as the unique redeemer of humankind Whose death on the

cross and resurrection from the dead make salvation possible.

Central to the medieval consensus was the necessity of faith and religion. To the medieval mind, faith was the primary avenue for the acquisition of knowledge. Medievals thought that all of reality was so penetrated by mystery that mere observation of facts would never reveal truth. The Scriptures and the church held a privileged position as repositories of truth.

This medieval consensus produced a social order that was thought to reflect divine order and authority. This order developed slowly over the centuries. Early feudalism brought stability out of the chaos that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire. To the feudal system were gradually added other elements, the most important of which were the divine right of kings and the rule of law.

In the medieval social order, the church (in the sense of institutional Christianity) stood above culture. It not only communicated Christian content, it also perpetuated forms that helped people to grasp the significance of that content. High culture embodied the ideals of Christian theology and tradition: philosophy, music, art, architecture, politics, and jurisprudence were profoundly influenced by Christian categories. The folk cultures also came to be permeated with Christian ideals, which manifested themselves in everyday arrangements such as work, home life, crafts, and folk art. To participate in these folk cultures was to gain a practical knowledge of several key Christian categories.

This medieval consensus began to break apart as Nominalism triumphed over Realism in late medieval philosophy. Nominalism led to Baconianism, then to the Enlightenment itself. By the time of Descartes, the “Ages of Faith” had ended and the Christian consensus rapidly unraveled.

With the arrival of the Enlightenment, the medieval world gave way to modernity. An entire conception of reality was rendered obsolete. The process of secularization began to erode even the vestigial authority of Christian values. The secular consensus of the modern world displaced the older medieval consensus almost point by point. The content of that modern consensus will be the subject of the next essay in this series.✘

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary’s professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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