

CHAPTER FIVE: THE RELIGIOUS MIDDLE AGES

In 410 the Goths invaded the city of Rome, which marked the end of a great city. From Constantine onward, the empire is referred to as the Byzantine Empire which continued for another thousand years, with its capital in Constantinople.

The End of Rome

The fall of Rome has often been misrepresented; this was no battle between the barbarians and the Christians. In fact, some of the Goths were Christians, and they respected church buildings and religious objects as they took the city.ⁱ Citizens who did not resist were spared; the Goths let their faith temper the manner of conquering. Many Roman Christians joined the procession of Goths as they overtook the city. Perhaps they were more afraid of the tax collectors than they were the Goths!

With the collapse of Rome, Europe entered the Middle Ages. Clearly this was no dark age, considering the fact that Augustine and Jerome--two of the Christianity's greatest thinkers--were writing as the era began. Augustine admired Plato's philosophy, and incorporated much of the emphasis upon ideals into Christianity.ⁱⁱ For example, the abstract symbolism found in much of the art indicates that realism was set aside. Likewise the music of the era is the mystical Gregorian chant, again reflecting platonic idealism. The current emphasis of some theologians upon abstract doctrinal statements to the neglect of concrete applications may be a holdover from Augustine's platonism.

Justinian Economics

While the fifth century was marked by the conquests of Attila the Hun in Northern and Western Europe (who was more fair to his enemies than commonly thought), the sixth century

was dominated by Justinian, the leader of the Byzantine Empire in Eastern Europe. Justinian was a wise ruler in many aspects, and possessed a broad education in theology, Greek philosophy, and science.

He followed an excellent money policy by not allowing impurities to be added to the currency. With pure gold and silver currency, there was little or no inflation and Constantinople became the center of world trade. These policies were followed for the next six hundred years throughout the empire, and the economics remained strong.ⁱⁱⁱ It was only in the twelfth century that this changed, when they (you guessed it) debased the currency.^{iv} It is interesting that we no longer hear the phrase “sound as a dollar,” and perhaps our money policies have something to do with that.

Justinian economics were not all rosy, however. High taxes, excessive economic regulation, and wage and price controls remained. Trade restrictions and heavy taxation of trade items, what might be called a “bad neighbor policy,” resulted in almost constant war. This would seem to coincide with the biblical concept that you should treat your neighbor as you want to be treated--as one increases sanctions against free trade, other countries respond in kind, and bitterness, envy and hostility increase. If we had followed this well-known biblical concept, we might have been spared the two world wars of this century and perhaps even our own civil war.

Justinian’s economic controls also brought domestic problems. All of the complicated laws and restrictions contributed to unrest; excessive bureaucracy can produce misplaced reactions in the form of crime, rioting, and street violence. In the midst of these, someone got the idea of weapons control (they did not have guns, but gun control laws are today’s equivalent). The result? Even more violence, and only the criminals had weapons. Government control is

never a substitute for personal morality.

Justinian developed a number of major public works projects^v including a major church building program. You might call it “Christian pyramid building.” You could also compare it with Solomon’s building programs. Solomon went too far and spent Israel into bankruptcy, part of the reason for a split kingdom at his death. Of course some of our pastors have a similar lust for building, as did Justinian, but one wonders if the pastor and people build more for pride than anything else. Multi-million dollar buildings seem wildly incongruous in a world of starving millions.

Pillar Saints

During the Middle Ages, a number of very religious men, called monks, withdrew to live alone in caves, perhaps imitating the holy men in India. Their intent was to avoid the worldliness predominant in the churches of that time, although they probably could have accomplished more by remaining socially involved, (a few were).

Eventually monasteries developed, where monks studied science, theology and philosophy. They preserved the Bible by laboriously copying the scriptures by hand; had it not been for their work, we would probably not have the Bible today.

Unfortunately there was a negative side to monasticism as well. Separation and self-torture were commonly practiced, probably because they followed a perversion of Plato’s philosophy which saw the flesh as evil and the spirit as the only good. One monk, Simon Stylites, sat on top of pillars up to 60 feet high for over thirty years! Many of the monks felt they could show humility by not taking baths or keeping clean.^{vi} As St. Jerome said, “Once cleansed by Christ, a man need not be cleansed again.”^{vii} Such muddled thinking, clearly contrary to

Mosaic law which provided for many washings,^{viii} was a striking contrast to the great accomplishments of the monks. (Muddled thinking has not yet escaped us--one Georgia preacher built a "pole house"--a house on a pole in front of his church. He said he would not come down from his enclosure, equipped with commode, water and electricity, until he discovered what the Lord wanted of him!)

The monastic movement has often been contrasted with the wealth and corruption of the institutional church of the Middle Ages. While there certainly was growing corruption, as the power of the church grew, there were also a number of significant contributions the church made at this time. One thinks of the hospitals and other charitable work that took place during this era, as well as the emphasis upon the value of hard work.

Desert Religion

During the seventh century, Islam--the Moslems or followers of Mohammed--grew to be a powerful force, controlling the Near East, North Africa, and even part of Europe. In the one hundred years following the death of its founder, the movement grew from a tiny desert religion to a force surpassing the Roman empire at its greatest. Historians have compared the fresh vitality of Islam in 650 to the vigor of Christianity in the year 300. By 650 Christianity had become wealthy, complacent, and corrupt.

While Islam began with tolerance toward other religions, as it grew, persecution of Christians began. Often the new faith was spread at the point of a sword. One story, possibly legend, has an Islamic general burning the vast library of Egypt and stating that if the books said the same thing as the Koran they were superfluous, and if they did not they were evil.

While a great deal has been said against Islam, particularly its recent fundamentalist

variety, we should also see what it accomplished in the Middle Ages. The followers of Allah introduced algebra and brought a welcome change from Roman numerals to today's Arabic number system (have you ever tried to multiply with Roman numerals?), although the new numbers were borrowed from India.

They also maintained a strict monotheism, advocated a simple lifestyle, and made significant contributions to literature, science, agriculture, medicine, and other areas. They also invented the zero. One student commented that was an invention that wasn't worth much, but what would a million be without it? Perhaps their accomplishments are best accounted for by the fact that Islam is a Christian heresy, and the Christian elements that were retained spurred their advancements while their distortions of Christianity produced their cruelty.

The negative side of Islam is perhaps better known. Their view of God as distant and fierce is clearly an aberration of the biblical view, while Christ is placed in an inferior position to Mohammed. Women are degraded to a position of slavery or playthings for men, while heaven is regarded as sensual rather than spiritual.

Charlemagne and Church Growth

In the late eighth and early ninth centuries, Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman emperor by the pope. He reconquered some of the old Roman Empire, and as he fought, he founded Christian churches to civilize those he conquered.

Hardly a saint, Charlemagne had some glaringly weak points. Beheading 4500 Saxons,^{ix} maintaining nine or more wives and concubines, and acknowledging ten illegitimate children probably takes him off the saint list. But he did form a palace school, gathering many of the finest teachers from throughout Europe. He even tried to learn to write, but succeeded in only

writing his own name. When he died, his empire fragmented.

The Devil's Advocate

About 1115, Peter Abelard began teaching in Paris, and his popularity was so great that the university of Paris was founded in 1150.^x Oxford began a few years later and soon other new universities began.

The early schools made use of such primitive teaching methods as professors lecturing and students taking notes by hand! Actually, recent research into learning indicates that lectures and note-taking constitute one of the most effective ways of learning--not always fun, but it often does the job better than computers.

One of the problems in the early universities was that anyone who disagreed with the established opinion was considered a heretic and thus burned at the stake. That presents a difficulty: how does one enter a debate when your opponent (or you) will be reduced to cinders afterward?

Their solution was brilliant. They developed what was called "the devil's advocate," who would take the "wrong" side in the dialogue and afterward concede to the accepted viewpoint. Thus these early teachers could present both sides of an issue, spurring more thought than just presenting one side.^{xi} Unfortunately, some university teachers have now reverted to the one-sided approach, putting down or avoiding any discussion of alternatives (particularly Christian alternatives.) Psychological research indicates that some understanding of an opposing position makes the student more likely to resist persuasion--a point churches and Christian teachers should keep in mind.

The early university education consisted of three principal areas: theology, philosophy

and logic.^{xiii} All academic disciplines related to a central core of theology, the “queen of the sciences.” Sad to say, of late the good queen has apparently abdicated, and the sciences are on their own. Modern education is too often an assortment of fragmented studies, bits and pieces of information which never seem to become integrated into a coherent whole. Christians must advocate an educational system which relates all knowledge to the Bible and the Christian faith; splintered knowledge is not sufficient in today's society.

Crusades for Christ?

In 1095 the first holy crusade was proclaimed to free Jerusalem from the Moslems. Actually the Moslems had tolerated pilgrimages (visits to receive blessings, healings or forgiveness) for a long time, but Turks were rumored to be torturing people. The first crusade was a disaster, with many starving and nearly everyone dying.

The first real army left a year later, although not everyone was motivated by religious zeal. Fringe benefits promised to crusaders included an instant trip to heaven if you died, excitement of travel,^{xiii} escape from prison for the imprisoned, and deferred interest on debts owed. This crusade was led by Godfrey, apparently a good man whose intention was to evangelize the Turks. He was an idealist, as were many crusaders, sure that he was on a holy quest.^{xiv} They were dreamers.

Because of the damage from the earlier crusade, many of the countries they passed through were unwilling to let them pass, resulting in battles being fought all the way to Jerusalem, people the crusaders did not want to fight. After three years they finally arrived at Jerusalem. In a dream they were instructed to walk around the walls of Jerusalem, fasting and repenting of their sins.

When they attacked, they apparently forgot their earlier repentance, as they massacred 70,000 Moslems, burned harmless Jews in the synagogue, and committed other grossly immoral acts.^{xv} Godfrey climbed to Calvary with other crusaders and kissed the tomb of Jesus. One historian noted that those who killed the most were the first to go to the holy sepulcher.

It is tragic that even the finest Christians can miss God's will. As noted in chapter 2, the godly Josiah missed God's will entirely, while Necho, a heathen king, warned him not to "meddle with God." Good people who are ignorant can be worse than bad people. To Godfrey's credit, however, he refused to be crowned king in spite of a movement to do so.^{xvi}

Fifty years later Bernard again began to preach the need for a crusade. This time nearly all of the crusaders were wicked and degenerated, a fact admitted even by Bernard.^{xvii} The crusade was a failure, as were later crusades. While the horrible damage of the crusaders should not be overlooked, we must not forget that one bomb in World War II produced far more death and damage in a few minutes than all of the crusades combined.

Power of the Popes

Some people have the idea that if we could just get a Christian leader in control and give him lots of power to change things, everything would improve dramatically. Well, it's been tried and the idea failed miserably. The popes were practically kings in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, yet big religion wedded to big government produced the same thing as big government plus anything--corruption. "Power corrupts" is a principle that holds true, regardless of how religious one is (dare we mention Jim Bakker?)

The enthronement of the clergy to form a theocracy is not God's ideal. The old Testament clearly indicates that there must be a separation of power between church and state,

with the provision that religious leaders can directly confront and counteract the force of an immoral leader of state. We need Christian leaders of state, and Christian principles in government and law, but not the church ruling the state.

The Great Charter

While many have claimed that the Renaissance started the modern era, it is more likely that the signing of the Magna Carta (Great Charter) in 1215 is the beginning. This important document established the principle that the king was under God and under the law. Today we have defined democracy as whatever the majority wants, but we need a resurgence of the Magna Carta ideal of the majority under God's law. This is workable democracy, and without it democracy is not much better than communism.

The Magna Carta also protected people's rights in other ways.^{xviii} The king was forbidden to oppress his subjects, while taxation was to be controlled. A fair trial was demanded for every person, and justice must be swiftly secured. Each of these important principles needs to be reapplied to our modern government, which too often falls short.

Guilds are Bad Business.

The equivalent of today's unions, the French guilds, became very popular during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. The intent was to help protect the average worker from unfair trade practices, maintain standards for productions, and manifest charity and piety. Unfortunately the French government began working with unions, giving more power to the unions and more money for the king. The result was monopoly, excessively high standards, controlled recruitment and advancement of laborers, and ultimately high unemployment.^{xix}

Those same effects can be found in American unions, which grew out of the 1930's

movement. For example, monopoly is represented by codes which require that only union people can wire their own homes. I recall an individual who had done his own wiring with expensive wire was required to remove it and have it replaced by cheaper wire because it wasn't originally done by a union member.

Unemployment is sometimes the net effect of union control even today. I know a black man who bought a truck to make a living by hauling merchandise, only to find that no one would give him work because the local union would not allow a newcomer to join. The French guilds caused as many problems as they solved, and our wealthy powerful unions today may not be any better than the businesses with which they conflict.

Deadly Plagues

It was in 1348 that the Black Death wiped out one-third to one-half of Europe's population.^{xx} With perhaps hundreds dying each day in small towns, people became preoccupied with death.

Such plagues have occurred regularly over human history. In 1665 and 1666 the London plague wiped out 200,000 people,^{xxi} 6000 in a single week!^{xxii} They stopped having funerals because so many were dying, instead carts came by each evening to pick up bodies to be buried in common graves. The plague finally ended when a massive fire burned most of the city, cleaning up the incredible filth.

What caused the plagues? We now know that rats and fleas spread the disease, but at the time people blamed bad air. The solution seemed simple: sniff ashes, so you would sneeze and blow out the bad air, then sniff flowers to get good air. From this came to little jump rope chant:^{xxiii}

“Ring a round a rosey” (the red rash from the epidemic)

“A pocketful of posies” (flowers for good air)

“Ashes, Ashes” (ashes sniffed to produce sneezing)

“All fall down” (ultimately all die from the disease)

Plague, of a more sophisticated variety, is still with us, and a possible repeat of medieval plagues is possible. The Surgeon General has stated that a coming AIDS epidemic may make the bubonic plague “look like a Sunday School picnic.” During the earlier plagues, people didn’t realize the obvious cause--the rats and fleas. Today we don’t seem to realize the obvious--our plague is most often spread by promiscuous sexuality. The easiest and most economical way of eliminating AIDS is to practice heterosexual monogamy.

Aquinas and Science

While Augustine helped usher in the Middle Ages by combining Plato’s philosophy with Christianity, Aquinas ended the Middle Ages by combining Christianity with Aristotle’s philosophy. While some have elevated Augustine and criticized Aquinas, both are probably overreactions. Augustine paved the way for certain distortions of Christianity (for example, self-mutilation by “holy” men), while Aquinas certainly did not originate humanism as some claim.

Indeed, partly due to his interest in Aristotle, Aquinas worked out a “harmony” of scripture and science which paved the way for later scientific advancement. Aquinas designated four categories of law,^{xxiv} from the highest and most comprehensive, to the more specific and more fallible. These categories included:

1. The eternal law of God
2. Eternal law, revealed in the Bible, derived from #1

3. Natural law, which can be comprehended by reason, and is also derived from #1

4. Governmental law, which is ideally related to #1

As can be seen, God's eternal truth is at the summit. Although we may never understand His Truth comprehensively, we can know it in part. We can therefore learn part of His Truth through studying the scriptures (level 2), His special revelation, and discover His Truth through systematic research and reason (level 3). Society and government should therefore attempt to implement God's eternal law through using biblical principles and general revelation. The third level is, in particular, a good foundation for science, and may have helped spur innovation during the Renaissance and Reformation.

Christians need to balance Augustine and Aquinas, as well as Plato and Aristotle. Christianity is more than just subscribing to statements of faith (Augustine's platonism); we should be actively involved in living out our faith by discovering God's Truth through reason and research (Aquinas' Aristotelianism).

-
- i. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. II, pp. 163-164.
 - ii. F. Roy Willis, *Western Civilization*, vol. 1, pp. 146-147.
 - iii. Elgin Groseclose, "Money, Man and Morals," *Christianity Today*, June 21, 1963, pp. 17-18.
 - iv. Willis, op cit, p. 180.
 - v. Ibid, pp. 189-190.

-
- vi. White, *Warfare of Science with Theology*, vol. II, p. 69.
 - vii. Howard Haggard, *Devils, Drugs and Doctors*, P. 284.
 - viii. S. I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases*, pp. 19-24.
 - ix. Gibbon, op cit, vol. III, pp. 33-34.
 - x. Luella Cole, *History of Education*, pp. 151-198.
 - xi. John S. Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 64-65.
 - xii. Carl Becker, *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, p. 17.
 - xiii. George Cox, *The Crusades*, pp. 32-33.
 - xiv. Gibbon, op cit, vol. III, pp. 433-439.
 - xv. Ibid, pp. 461-462.
 - xvi. Ibid.
 - xvii. Robinson and Breasted, *History of Europe*, pp. 394-395.
 - xviii. Baldwin, *Thirty More Famous Stories*, pp. 121-122, and Winston Churchill, *Birth of Britain*, pp. 242-257.
 - xix. Willis, op cit, p. 264.
 - xx. Robinson, *Story of Medicine*, pp. 231-232.
 - xxi. James Leasor, *The Plague and the Fire*, p. 183.
 - xxii. Ibid, pp. 147-148.
 - xxiii. Haggard, op cit, p. 196.
 - xxiv. Irving Howard, "The Theology of the Declaration of Independence," *Christian Economics*, June 11, 1957, p. 1.