SPLENDOUR OF THE MIDDLE AGES : THE MAJESTIC INFLUENCE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON MANKIND

Extracted from Chapter 2 of H J A Sire's *Phoenix from the Ashes*[1]

The High Middle Ages: Spirituality and Intellect

[I]t is only in the years after 1050 that we encounter the high civilisation of the Middle Ages, with its unique achievement. We may measure that uniqueness by noticing that in the thousand years of Byzantine history there was no time of florescence that can be quite compared to it; subjection to the secular power produced a relative atrophy of the Greek church. By contrast Western Christendom witnessed an explosion of creative and regulative genius. Central to it was the reform of the papacy, giving Europe the strength of its ecclesiastical polity and the bases of its legal tradition. Another element was the surge of military energy that produced the Crusades, the Norman conquest of Sicily and Tunisia, and the Christian recovery of most of Spain. These gains transferred control of the Mediterranean from Moslem to Christian hands, and their effect both economically and culturally, was as important to Europe as that of the fifteenth-century discoveries. Another effect of the Crusades was to divert efforts from internal warfare. The period before 1337 was not one of national wars, while advances on the fringes were directed towards bringing Moslem and pagan lands within the borders of Christendom.

A central influence of this time was the growth of the religious orders. Monasticism recruited the austere devotion of the Cistercians, and the foundation of the Dominicans and Franciscans brought the religious life into the streets and market squares. The orders had an influence on mediaeval civilisation that touched the fields of architecture, education, economic life, and even parliamentary institutions. Their greatest achievement was the rise of the universities. Those of Paris and Bologna, the leading ones in Europe, were founded in the twelfth century, and nearly twenty more arose in the thirteenth. They formed a network of education such as the ancient world had never produced, revealing a thirst for learning, even among the poor, peculiar to this time. The sheer numbers that flocked to these wells of knowledge were astonishing; Paris and Oxford had more students in the thirteenth century than in the nineteenth. Equally notable was their international character, requiring the student bodies to be formed into "nations" or into university colleges with ties to a particular region. The use of a common language and a common method gave a unity and efficiency to this European system never known by Greece and Rome, and permitted an interchange of students and teachers unequalled until our own time.

And from the universities sprang perhaps the most important legacy of the time, its philosophy. The High Middle Ages were the time when the Catholic Church came intellectually of age. The Thirteenth century produced the teachers who formed the character of mediaeval thought. Alexander

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1 *Phoenix from the Ashes ; The Making, Unmaking, and Restoration of Catholic Tradition*, Angelico Pres, Kettering Ohio, 2015, pages 24-31.

of Hales, the *doctor irrefragabilis*, initiated the golden age of scholasticism. Albertus Magnus introduced Aristotelianism to the West. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of all, synthesised it in a system that the Church recognised as the supreme expression of its philosophy.

It did so from no accidental motives, but because of Aristotle's unique place in philosophical history. All other thinkers have begun with a theory and sought to fit reality into it; Aristotle is the only philosopher to have begun with reality and devised a system by which to understand it. He may thus be called the only scientific philosopher, though to put it that way is to connive at the modern flattery of science. It would be equally true to say that the philosophical framework of all scientists, as of any practical thinker, is essentially Aristotelian. Aristotle took the whole of human knowledge for his study. The other ancient philosophers, other than those who were primarily scientists, ignored physics, or, as with the Epicureans, considered them only superficially. Aristotle embraced both metaphysics and physical science; and he did so in no schematic spirit but by a painstaking assessment of the scientific thought of his time. Where Aristotle accepts or rejects a scientific explanation, he does so on practical grounds, not on those of consonance of dissonance with a preconceived theory. He also invested the science of logic with a precision that no other ancient philosopher attained. He illuminated ethics and aesthetics and analysed the dramatic art with insights that have remained valid for over two thousand years.

The same universal spirit is seen in the thinkers who brought Aristotle into Catholic thought. The choice of Aristotelianism was no following of an intellectual fashion, but the recovery of a philosophy which neither Roman antiquity, nor Byzantium, nor even the Arabic world, from which it was directly taken, had properly estimated. Few things better indicate the genius of the Catholic Church than this reaching out to select a new philosophy from the adverse influences of the world. This was not the result of some mystical inspiration accorded to Albert and Aquinas: rather, it was the natural direction of great intellects working under the tradition of the Church, under its divinely granted gift of truth and right reason; and, by working within that tradition, they chose a philosophy of unique rationality and comprehensiveness. This fact needs to be asserted against the incomprehension of their own time, when critics rejected Aristotelianism as a profane pagan philosophy, against those who see it merely as one ancient philosophy among many, and against the dupes of the school originated by Francis Bacon, who advanced the caricature of Aristotelianism as a system of formalism and authority.

If thinkers in the thirteenth century had founded a school of Catholic Platonism, it would have been a noteworthy cultural achievement but an arbitrary one, and without defining influence on the thought of the Church. In this light one may comment on bertrand Russell's judgment: “I cannot but think that the substitution of Aristotle for Plato and St Augustine was a mistake from the Christian point of view. Plato's temperament was more religious than Aristotle's... St Thomas, little though he intended it, prepared the way for the return from Platonic dreaming to scientific observation.” [Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1946) Book 2, Chap. 15] To this one may reply that a return to science, in the sense of genuine enquiry rather than materialist preconception, was indeed what St Thomas intended. But the more essential error is in the premise of Russell's comment. The Church does not embrace a philosophy because it is congenial, but because of its inherent truth. We can see this in the fate suffered in the nineteenth century by the school of “Traditionalism”, a theory developed by Bonald and Maistre in reaction to the French Revolution, and which contended that man attains knowledge through tradition rather than through

reason. Agreeable though the view might seem to pious minds, the philosophy was condemned. Even at that low point of its intellectual life, the Church was not prepared to have nonsense talked on its behalf. Its aim in promoting philosophy is not to instil ideas that predispose to religious belief; it is to inculcate sound discipline of thought, without which theology is as much at sea as philosophy or science. Since the earliest days, the principle was implicit in Christianity that Revelation is in harmony with every field of truth, and that to perfect reason is to perfect religious understanding. Thomism, by its rationality and comprehensiveness, provided the fullest embodiment of that principle. It may be that one day a system of equal or greater power will supersede it, taking into account the thought, and especially the science, of succeeding centuries; but it is certain that no such system has yet been devised.

Besides producing this supreme intellectual achievement, the heyday of scholasticism also illustrates the character of the Middle Ages. One of the great anti-Catholic myths misrepresents mediaeval thought as reactionary, parochial, and enslaved to authority. Everything in the Middle Ages confutes that accusation. It is well known that, in adopting Aristotelianism, the scholastics were not only bringing ancient Greek thought to the West in an innovative way; they were assimilating Aristotle in the very modern interpretations evolved by the Persian Avicenna (980-1037), the Spanish Arab Averroes (1126-98), and the Spanish Jew Maimonides (1135-1204). It is less often realised how, in accepting these, Western Christendom was transcending not only its own but even the Arabic culture from which it [learned]. The remark of one scholar may be quoted: "none of these three thinkers had any appreciable influence within his own world [in fact Averroes and Maimonides were forced into exile for their teaching], whereas on almost every page of the thirteenth century Christian *summae* the names of Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides are found." [Joseph Pieper, "Scholasticism", in Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th edition, 1985]

It is equally wrong to think of scholastic philosophy as imposed unquestioned by ecclesiastical authority. St Thomas's system encountered the fiercest opposition, and he was only protected by the enlightenment of the papacy in welcoming this fresh contribution to the intellectual stock of Christianity. After his death his philosophy was condemned by his own university of Paris. There also quickly sprang up a rival system, devised by a scholastic of almost equal brilliance, Duns Scotus, which choked the growth of Thomism until its revival in the early sixteenth century, from which period only does it emerge as the dominant philosophical school in the Church.

The men of the High Middle Ages did not, as is alleged, see truth as imposed by authority and immune from challenge. A token of this is that the typical form of the mediaeval university act was the disputation; scholars revelled in the clash of opinions and arguments. The Middle Ages recognised indeed (and in this they showed their wisdom) that the best service they could pay to knowledge was to recover the achievements of the ancients; but they did not see those as final. Bernard of Chartres (died c.1130) is known for a pronouncement that was to be borrowed by Isaac Newton: "We are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giant. In that way we see more and further than they, not because our sight is keener or our stature higher, but because they hold us aloft and raise us with all their gigantic height." The Franciscan Gilbert of Tournai (died c.1280) wrote, "We shall never find the truth if we content ourselves with what has been found already. Those who wrote before us are not for us masters but guides. The truth is open to all and has not yet been possessed in full." If we compare this spirit with that of the Renaissance, it was the humanists who cultivated a

reverent submission to ancient authority, whereas the Middle Ages showed a critical approach to the classical legacy, together with an openness to the thought of the Arab world.

The Scientific Spirit of the Middle Ages

Francis Bacon, in his attack on Aristotelianism, originated the myth that the Middle Ages were an unscientific time, a dark interlude between antiquity and the Renaissance. The view has been perpetuated by those who wish to denigrate the Catholic tradition. Leonardo da Vinci for his scientific writings has been exalted as a unique genius by those ignorant of the mediaeval thinkers whose work he developed, or merely reproduced. The Middle Ages were, rightly seen, the most scientifically-minded age there has been in human history until the one that succeeded it. It was in the Middle Ages that the ideas of ancient Greek science first became generally known and accepted in Western Europe, for the Romans had shown little interest in them. Scientific encyclopaedias of great scope were written by the Franciscan Bartholomaeus Anglicus (*fl.* c.1230-50) , the Dominican Vincent of Beauvais (died c.1264), and Raymond Lull (c. 1235-1316). The standard *Quadrivium* of the universities was essentially scientific metaphysics (which included physics), astronomy, medicine, and mathematics; the study of ethics included politics and economics. The Middle Ages were replete with men who belong to the highest rank of scientific thinking. Albertus Magnus (c. 1200-80) wrote the *Theatrum Chemicum* from acute personal observation, and propounded a doctrine of the uniformity of matter (against that of the "four elements") that anticipates the atomic theory. Robert Grosseteste (c. 1175-1253), Bishop of Lincoln, was a thinker of equal greatness who sustained that the Earth was round and promoted the science of optics; his theory of the creation, and particularly of the primacy of light as a feature of the material universe, looks forward to modern cosmology and Einstein's principle that the value of the speed of light is absolute: Grosseteste taught that God created undifferentiated matter, and that light, by diffusion, gave rise to the dimensions of space. His pupil was the Franciscan Roger Bacon (c. 1214-92), who described the structure of the eye and the use of magnifying glasses, besides pursuing other scientific enquiries which have caused him to be praised, wrongly, as a man out of his time. Another of his mentors besides Grosseteste was Petrus Peregrinus, whose work on magnetism stood unsurpassed for three centuries. In astronomy, the rotation of the Earth was defended by Nicholas Oresme, bishop of Lisieux (c. 1320-82), and by Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (von Kues; 1401-64).

In the recovery of ancient knowledge the work of the Middle Ages was no smaller than that of the Renaissance, an era whose name represents a distortion if not an exaggeration; for the achievement of he Renaissance was to draw on the art and literature of antiquity, where mediaeval learning had revived its philosophy and science. Here we see one of the most fundamental characteristics of the Middle Ages, their practical bent. This is found within the field of philosophy itself; the aim of the great scholastics was not to spin abstract theories but to build up a practical system of knowledge for students (and this is one reason why scholasticism has come to be thought of as cut-and-dried). In the scientific field it is shown in the application of discoveries, in which the Middle Ages outstripped the progress of the ancient world. In agriculture, we find the three-field rotation method, in place of the two-field method practised by the Romans, with a great consequent increase in the variety of food grown. The Romans had known water mills but had used them little; the Middle Ages filled every available stream with mills—5,624 in England are recorded by Domesday Book—and their use was extended to industries such as fulling and paper-making. The windmill was a mediaeval invention,

soon to be a familiar emblem of the countryside. The devising of an efficient horse collar for draft, of horse-shoes in their modern form, and of the stirrup extended the capacities of transport. The iron industry far exceeded the production of Roman times. At sea, the use of the compass, the replacement of the stern-paddle with the rudder, and improvements in shipbuilding and rigging produced a revolution in navigation. Military architecture for the first time surpassed the achievements of the Romans. The feats of ecclesiastical architecture were even greater; the Gothic style took engineering to technical heights not surpassed until the nineteenth century. Of the thirteenth-century cathedral of Coutances, Vauban was to ask: "Who was the sublime madman who dared launch such a monument into the air?" Fourteenth-century Florence, using Gothic forms of construction, invented the dome in a form that the Romans had never known, but which was to prove fertile inspiration for the Renaissance. In medicine, Europe absorbed and began to improve upon the science of the Arabs. Guy of Montpelier, whose city was the leading medical centre in the West, was summoned by Innocent III to found the great papal hospital in Rome. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, came Salicet, Lanfranc, the polymath Arnald of Vilanova (like St Thomas condemned by the Sorbonne but protected by the pope), and the papal physician Guy de Chauliac, whose work defined medical practice for two centuries. Dissection, far from being suppressed by the Church, became an instrument for the teaching of medicine as it had not been in the ancient world. The glass lens was a mediaval invention, and spectacles were being manufactured in Italy from about 1285.

In this wave of progress a marked feature was the religious patronage of science. Nearly all the figures mentioned above were clerics or closely connected with the Church. An invention especially linked to ecclesiastical concerns was the mechanical clock, unknown to antiquity, and reflecting the Church's interest in the scientific measurement of time. The famous clocks of the Middle Ages were associated with the cathedrals and great monastery churches. Similarly, the church tower in Western Europe became the most common place to find a public clock—an arrangement that the Eastern Church did not allow until the twentieth century. When printing was introduced, its leading customer was the Church, while in the Moslem world printing was wholly banned on religious grounds until the nineteenth century.

A Civilisation of Faith, Hope and Charity

The above facts are given to counter the intellectual disparagement of the Middle Ages, and therefore of the religious system that nurtured them. Yet is would play the denigrators' game to imply that the Middle Ages are to be judged by their material works. The greatness of this age is to be sought in other fields: in the emergence of a civilisation founded on faith, hope and charity. This achievement we discover wherever we look in the old domain of Europe, in the village churches and the great cathedrals soaring heavenward, in the memorial abbeys and chantries, in the *Maisons-Dieu*, the hospices for travellers on every road, the specialised refuges founded for sufferers from leprosy and other diseases, in the guilds with their devotions and charities, in the popular culture of religious songs and plays. The Middle Ages established the main traits that still typify Catholicism: monks continue to wear the mediaeval cowl; plainchant epitomises the beauty of Catholic worship, although today, abandoned by the Church, it is chiefly used by filmmakers wanting a sound track for scenes set in a religious house. The Gothic style is the supreme expression of the character of prayer as the raising of the heart and mind to God. Its capturing of mysticism in stone expresses the genius of the Middle Ages as few other achievements do. It was also a style of extraordinary fecundity. The ancient

world perfected the temple style about 500 BC, and went on building after the same pattern for eight hundred years, whereas Gothic can be dated to a generation by its changes of style.

The Middle Ages fall short of standards of the highest civilisation in the sense that in many ways they were a still semi-barbarous time; yet the strength of the drive to tame barbarism is even more noteworthy. No society, it may be said, has ever given such influence to sanctity and to virtue. Saints shaped the character of the time, not only as popes, bishops, and abbots, but in the high offices of civil life, and often on the throne. We may speak of St Elizabeth (1207-31), daughter of King Andrew of Hungary and by marriage Landgravine of Thuringia; her charity and sweetness of character caused her to be acknowledged as a saint within four years of her death. Other ornaments of their age were the contemporary Kings St Ferdinand III of Castile (1199-1252) and St Louis IX of France (1215-1270), who founded the legal traditions of their respective kingdoms. They were sons of two remarkable and holy sisters, Berengaria and Blanche of Castile, who both had great influence in the upbringing of their sons. Blanche was twice regent of France, first during her son's minority and at the end of her life when Louis left on the Seventh Crusade. Ferdinand was one of the most formative rulers of his country, uniting the kingdoms of Castile and Leon and conquering Cordova and Seville from the Moors. Louis's work in France was equally fundamental; he gave form and stability to the country at t time of persistent conflict with England and led two crusades to the East. Through such wise and devout rulers, “lights on an earth more fair than shone from Plato's page,” mediaeval Europe matured in its political philosophy and practice.

Against the moral and intellectual achievements of the Middle Ages, we have the modern notion of the time as synonymous with superstition and barbarism. For that idea we may put the blame on a hostile tradition of history, but also on the intrinsic difficulty of weighing the merits of a great culture. Stories of brutality or of clerical corruption can be understood by anyone, but it is not simple to appreciate the essence of a civilisation, to compare it with the whole record of human history, and to see the achievement of Christianity in building a society that was unequalled in creative power, in spiritual depth, and in human compassion. To an understanding of such scope minds do not easily rise, and they are the less likely to do so when they approach the subject across a barrier of enmity and distortion. The achievement of the Catholic faith in the Middle Ages is not something that can be summed up in a chapter; we can only discover it if we are prepared to make an intellectual journey through what was once Western Christendom, a journey that considers the art, the music, the literature, the philosophy, and especially the treasures of spirituality and liturgy on which the Church itself has now turned its back. Only when we have assessed these can we begin to see what Christian revelation fully implies for human society and human history.
