

The Medieval Experience

Charles St-Onge, March 24, 2001

The medieval period of western civilization stretches over a thousand years of history. It was a period into which the church entered as a newly established state-religion, and exited as a body on the verge of fragmentation. It was also a period that started with the Roman Empire in the eve of its glory, and ended with a Europe on the dawn of a new era of prosperity. How were the upheavals of the political structures of Europe related to the changes the church was undergoing? The answer is not a simple one. There certainly seems to have been a type of perichoresis between medieval church and medieval society, with both being influenced and changed by its encounter with the other. The church, on the one hand, found its self-understanding being shaped and changed in the years after the 4th century. Medieval government, academia, and culture were in turn influenced by the presence of the “culture” of the church. Who was more influenced is hard to say. It is certain, however, that the interactions of the church and the societies of the medieval period gave western civilization its present shape.

The church itself did not pass through the medieval period unaltered. It was not, however, the Middle Ages themselves that most changed the church’s self-understanding but an event which occurred before those ages began. The so-called “Constantinian Revolution” marked a significant change in the Christian church’s relationship to society that dominated its self-understanding for the entire medieval period (Oakley, 14). The church, which began as an organization at odds with the world, found itself embraced by the temporal order under the Emperor Constantine. From that point on, it was caught between two worlds. The church, especially the western church, was now both institution and sect, stuck between its new temporal role as “civic religion” and its ancient role as a kingdom “not of this world”.

The institutional western church may have been more affected by its adoption as a public religion under Constantine than the eastern church. This may have been due in part to the tendency among western bishops, such as Cyprian of Carthage, to emphasize submission to ecclesiastical authorities and a more juridical understanding of the atonement in their churches. It may also have been due to Augustine of Hippo’s battles against the Pelagians and the Donatists, which led him to define the church as both “invisible” and “visible”. Gregory I, the last of the western church fathers, repackaged and popularized Augustine’s ecclesiastical theology into a hierarchical sacerdotal system. The end result was a western church that was already “political and coercive in nature” (Oakley, 53) in the 5th century. As this church headed into the Middle Ages, it would already be more likely to be influenced by temporal affairs than would have the church of the 1st and 2nd century.

The institutional western church during the medieval period found itself being influenced and changed by its encounter with pagan tribes in two noteworthy ways. The first was in its adaptation of its own understanding in the face of pagan practices. Christianity accommodated itself to the old nature religions of the tribes of Europe, perhaps more than it should have (Oakley, 68). Pagan goddesses, such as Bridget of Ireland, were rehabilitated as saints of the church. Feast days, such as the Celtic New Year’s festival, were added to the church calendar as “Christian” feasts, such as All Souls’ Day. While this may have been regarded as shrewd missionary tactics, “the price paid was for centuries a larger one than we usually tend to suspect.” (Oakley, 67). There may even be a parallel between the church’s efforts to “Christianize” pagan ritual and the apostasy of the northern Kingdom of Israel in modifying YHWH-worship by introducing Ba’al and Asherah rituals.

The second was the church’s altering of its own theology to accommodate pagan understandings of the “divine right of kings”. The pagan tribes of Europe had for a long time understood their kings as having “divine status.” This recognition lasted well into the 16th centuries in some areas of Europe (Oakley, 68). The church of the Middle Ages came to support that thinking to a certain extent by recognizing certain

rulers as legitimate kings over others. The first clear example of this would be the papal recognition of the Carolingian claim to the Frankish throne in 751 AD (Oakley, 69). King Charlemagne was acclaimed “king and priest” in 794 AD, also encouraging in some form continued recognition of the king as ruling both temporally but also spiritually (Oakley, 69). A further enmeshment of the church in claims to temporal kingship can be seen in the growing prerequisite of “noble blood” for ecclesiastical advancement in the later Medieval period (Oakley, 70).

The institutional western church found itself more and more influenced by the affairs of “this world” in the Medieval period. It has indeed been written that “By the time of the Emperor Charlemagne in the early 9th century, there emerged in the West a single public society – church, empire, Christian commonwealth...” (Oakley, 53) At the same time, however, elements within the church that might be called “sectarian” kept alive the spirit and theology of the early church. Whereas as the “visible” church may have been increasingly influenced by its encounters with pagan cultures, the “invisible” church had a profound “Christianizing” effect on Medieval European civilization.

There are three areas of Medieval European life where the church had a significant and lasting effect on society. The first was in the area of science and research. Christianity taught the uniqueness, omnipotence, and transcendence of God, in contrast to the old pagan religions and even Greek philosophy. This “shattered the archaic sense of the divine as a continuum running through the worlds of nature and of man and binding the two together.” (Oakley, 101) Because of this separation of God from the created order, space was created for belief that the natural order could be studied as “natural”, apart from God. The monasteries of the Middle Ages, in part due to the impetus of Cassiodorus, were centers of learning and promoters of the liberal arts. Scholarly work continued in the monasteries when it had ceased in society in general (Oakley, 146). So Christianity can be credited as the reason why science and technology flourished in 17th and 18th centuries in Europe when it did not in the Middle East, Persia, or China.

The second way that the influence of the church continues to be felt even to the present day was on the principles of government. Although the church was itself influenced by pagan forms of government, including the idea of the “divine right of kings”, it also exercised an influence in return. By shattering the continuum between worldly and divine, it in effect undermined the divine right of monarchs while at the same time seemingly supporting it. The conciliarists of the church, in turn, established the principal of government by “constitution”. Government should be based on “reason, policy, and scripture”, and governors should not rule arbitrary but according to just laws (Oakley, 134). Thus the church in effect laid the groundwork for the emergence of constitutional government in Europe.

Lastly, the church did indeed change the morality of the medieval pagan cultures it evangelized to one that was more “Christian.” The monastics of the church, including Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, and Dominic, had a lasting impact on the morality of medieval culture. People were encouraged to have a more “personal and emotional piety”, with fair treatment for the poor and for women emphasized where such treatment would not have occurred before (Oakley, 125, 181). The church, in effect, created a “kinder, gentler” Western Europe out of what once were barbarous, pagan tribes.

Was Medieval civilization, then, “Christian”? Could the church of the Middle Ages be itself called “Christian”? The melding of the pagan tribes that became the nations of Europe with the western catholic church resulted in each being changed by the other. The church’s move from sectarian organization to civic religion, its adoption of “Christianized” pagan practices, and its half-hearted support of “divine monarchies” significantly changed the face of the church. But the church also preserved its unique teachings and morality enough that it made an indelible mark on western civilization. Its theology and governance influenced medieval morality, created space for science and research, preserved ancient

knowledge, and laid the groundwork for constitutional government. Both church and society interpenetrated each other, creating that unique phenomenon called “Christendom” (Mead, 20).

Bibliography

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