Dark Age or Golden Age?

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Middle Ages Legacy: The Dark Ages

Tale of Three Cities

Winston Churchill once said, 'History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.' As many have said, history is written by the victors. The most complete source for the life of Julius Caesar is his own autobiography. The only record of Marco Polo's travels are tales he told a friend while in jail. The teaching of Socrates is only known through his student, Plato, who was himself a philosopher with ideas of his own. My point? Recorded history needs to be understood for what it is: subjective accounts by people with vested interests.

The writers of the Enlightenment were no exception. With an inflated sense of accomplishment and a nostalgia for antiquity, they christened the previous Church-dominated era 'The Dark Ages'. Though modern historians reject the label, preferring Medieval or Middle Ages, today, many still consider the years leading up to the Reformation an era of ignorance

and brutality. But these centuries were neither ‘dark’ nor ‘barbarous’. The Middle Ages was a period of rich culture and amazing advances.

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When Rome fell, not everything Roman went away overnight. Just as the philosophy and language of Ancient Greece outlasted her Empire and culture, so the legal and social structures of Rome survived the empire. While Rome was declining, the church was rising. The Europe that emerged towards the end of the first Millennium was a product of three cities. Athens for her philosophy, Rome with its legal framework, and Jerusalem, the birthplace of Christianity and Judeo-Christian morality.

The Dignity of Man

Egypt, Greece and Rome built their empires using slaves. In Rome, slaves made up 40% of the population. But with the church growing across Europe, the idea that every man has value because he is made in the image of God began to shape culture. By the year 1000 AD, slavery had almost died out in western Europe. In the UK, a census in 1086 AD showed slaves making up only 2-10% of the population.

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Slaves became the peasants and serfs that made up the working masses. The church taught that man did not lose dignity through physical labour, and that the labourer is worthy of his hire. Contrary to their portrayal in Hollywood, Medieval peasants were well provided for and enjoyed a good diet. Daily fresh porridge and bread, with beer to drink, was the norm. Dried or cured meats, cheeses, and seasonal local fruit and vegetables would also have been readily available. Poultry, fowl and pigeons were not uncommon, and some peasants kept bees to provide honey for their tables.

Peasants worked hard and were rewarded with church holidays and public festivals. Dancing and tournaments provided entertainment. And games, many of which, like chess and backgammon, are still played today. The Roman practice of slave-gladiators fighting to the death ended with the fall of Rome. Tournaments in Christian lands saw trained knights, normally rich landowners, compete in relatively safe combat, where the intention was not to kill, but rather

to score points against the opponent.

Fair Trial

Also connected to the dignity of man was the concept of a fair trial. Previously, those accused of crimes were tried by ordeal, often tortured for confessions, or assumed guilty until proven innocent. In ancient times, emperors, kings and chieftains may have represented the law, but the law was often capricious, and those who executed it were rarely subject to it. The English Magna Carta of 1215 AD changed that. This charter of liberties protected the people from capture or imprisonment, confiscation of property or curtailment of freedoms, 'but by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.' These were important provisions that led to the 'habeas corpus' of modern law, and the birth of human rights.

Universities

The Middle Ages saw the emergence of the monastic movement, and all over Europe monasteries sprang up. Christian monks were not only religious scholars. It is through their diligence in copying and studying ancient texts that the surviving pagan literature and secular philosophy of Greece and Rome, so popular during the Enlightenment, was preserved.

This passion for books and learning gave birth to another innovation: universities. The University of Bologna, founded in 1088, is the oldest university in the Western world. The University of Oxford is the oldest in the English-speaking world, founded over 200 years before the birth of the Central American Aztec Empire. What set universities like Bologna or Oxford apart was that they promoted research and debate, not just parrot-fashion learning. Also, unlike other institutions of the day, these autonomous communities of scholars studied secular as well as religious subjects. In this environment, science and philosophy blossomed, and the Middle ages produced some of the greatest art, music and literature in all of history.

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The Guttenberg Press

As literature flourished, Johannes Gutenberg unveiled his moveable type printing press. In our

world of daily newspapers, cheap airport novels and civic libraries full of books, it is hard to conceive a time before the printed word. But in 1440 AD, Guttenberg's press was revolutionary. For the first time, Bibles and other books could be printed instead of being copied by hand. This technology contributed to the drive to translate Bibles into the common languages of Europe. A cause for which many would give their lives.

The printing press also contributed to the Scientific Revolution. Now researchers had means to distribute their findings, which meant more people could become involved in the excitement of discovery and the sharing of ideas.

Art and Architecture

The Romans were outstanding architects. The Pantheon, which combines the Roman use of domes and poured concrete, was opened in 120 AD, is still the largest unsupported dome in the world, and remains in use today. But Roman architecture was bulky, with thick columns and heavy arches. The Gothic architecture of the middle ages, exemplified in the many cathedrals of that era, used far more delicate masonry. Clever use of flying buttresses distanced the supporting columns from the exterior walls, allowing the sun to stream through beautiful stained glass windows, filling the spaces with colour and light.

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Churches of the Middle Ages were also decorated with carvings, paintings and mosaics. Over the entrance, churchgoers would often see the last judgement, a reminder that they were sinners who rightly feared God and were destined to experience His wrath. But inside, the art would focus on God's provision of salvation through Jesus. Images of Christ's birth, baptism, passion, death and resurrection decorated the walls. Sometimes events in Jesus life were paired with 'types' of Christ from the Old Testament. A stained glass with Jesus carrying His cross might be paired with Isaac carrying fire-wood, on his way up the mountain. A scene of Jesus' resurrection might appear beside Jonah being spat from the fish after three days in the depths. Just as the soaring architecture reflected the height and majesty of God, so the artwork inside it spoke of His goodness, teaching the Scriptures even to those who could not read.

Different in scale, but equal in splendour, were the illuminated manuscripts produced during the Middle Ages. An illuminated manuscript is a document whose text is decorated with ornate initials, decorative borders and illustrations accented with silver and gold. Books like this took

years to create and were real labours of love. The greatest example is the Book of Kells. Gerald of Wales described seeing such a Gospel in the 12th Century: 'Fine craftsmanship is all about you, but you might not notice it. Look more keenly at it and you will penetrate to the very shrine of art. You will make out intricacies, so delicate and so subtle, so full of knots and links, with colours so fresh and vivid, that you might say that all this were the work of an angel, and not of a man.'

Darkness and Light

The church didn't always get everything right. Not every professing medieval Christian was a principled and faithful follower of Jesus. But belief in God and the widespread teaching of Scripture created a vibrant, diverse culture that created some of the greatest literature, art and architecture of all time. It was a rich society that embraced change and sought out new experiences and opportunities.

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The Enlightenment, that in so many ways was a rejection of God and the church, could never have happened without the foundations laid during the Middle Ages. Isaiah 5:20 says, 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness'. As we look at history, we need to see what God has done. Recognise the light as light and call the darkness what it is. The subtle deception of removing God is that by sleight of hand you have also removed the devil. That is what the devil wants most of all. To have all his work credited to reason, progress, or tolerance.

On February 7, 1864, Charles Pierre Baudelaire wrote a statement as true today as it ever was: 'My dear brothers, never forget, when you hear the progress of Enlightenment vaunted, that the devil's best trick is to persuade you that he doesn't exist!'

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