

CHAPTER 17 : THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

The twelfth century to the fourteenth century is generally known as the High Middle Ages. In the High Middle Ages of Europe we find more developed institutions of lordship and vassalage, castle-building and mounted warfare, and reviving urban and commercial life. Europe was gradually climbing out of the disorder and decentralization that had followed the collapse of the Western Roman empire. Most importantly, the Romish Papacy reached the height of its development and the pinnacle of its power in this period.

One way that Rome exercised her power at this time was in the form of the Medieval Inquisition. Inquisitors, usually Dominican or Franciscan monks, were mandated by the Pope to combat heresy, or heresy so called. The first letter giving such a mandate dates from 1231. The inquisitors, thus sent out from Rome, established themselves for a definite period of weeks or months at some central place, from which they issued orders demanding that all guilty of heresy present themselves. The inquisitors could themselves bring suit against any suspect person. Lesser penalties were imposed on those who came forward and confessed their heresy than on those who had to be tried and convicted. A period of grace of about a month was allowed for this spontaneous confession; after that, the actual trials began.

If the inquisitors decided to try a person suspected of heresy, the suspect's pastor delivered the summons. Inquisitorial police sought out those persons who refused to obey a summons, and the right of asylum did not apply to heretics. The accused were given a statement of charges against them. For some years the names of accusers were withheld from suspects, but Pope Boniface VIII abrogated that practice. The accused were compelled under oath, however, to answer all charges against them, thus becoming their own accusers. The testimony of two witnesses was generally considered proof of guilt.

The inquisitors usually had a kind of jury, composed of both clergy and laity, to assist them in arriving at a verdict. They were permitted to imprison suspects who were thought to be lying. In 1252 Pope Innocent IV, under the influence of the revival of Roman law, officially sanctioned the use of torture to extract the truth from suspects. Until then, this procedure was alien to the canonical tradition.

The penances and sentences for those who confessed or were found guilty were pronounced together in a public ceremony at the end of all the processes. This was the *sermo generalis* or *auto-da-fé*. Penances might consist of a pilgrimage, a public scourging, a fine, or the wearing of a cross. The wearing of two tongues of red cloth, sewn onto an outer garment, marked those who had made false accusations. The penalties in serious cases were confiscation of property or imprisonment. The most severe penalty the inquisitors could themselves impose was life imprisonment. Thus, when the inquisitors handed a guilty person over to civil authorities, it was tantamount to a demand for that person's execution.

Although the Inquisition in the beginning directed most attention to the Albigensians and, to a lesser degree, the Waldensians, it later extended its activities to other groups, such as the Fraticelli, the Henricians, and the Petrobrussians.

In the High Middle Ages Europe was becoming more intellectually aware of the ancient Greek and Roman scholarship which was largely buried in the West during the times of disorder and decentralization. This awareness was facilitated in part by increased European contacts with the Byzantine Empire and Arab Empire in the East and in Spain, stimulated in large measure by the Crusades in those regions of the world. The Arab and Byzantine Empires had preserved ancient scholarship better than the West.

Upon re-discovering the ancient scholarship, Western intellectuals esteemed it to an extent quite unjustified. Indeed, they felt they had to conform their Christian theology to this ancient pagan learning. Thus was born Scholasticism. Scholasticism comes from the Latin word *scholasticus* which means "that [which] belongs to the school", and is the school of philosophy taught by the academics (or "schoolmen") of medieval universities, especially prominent circa 1100 - 1300. Scholasticism attempted to reconcile the philosophy of the ancient classical philosophers with medieval Christian theology.

Peter Abelard represented one important strain of Scholastics. He was the first and in some respects the greatest of modern skeptics and secular humanists. He was the first person in Christendom to attack publicly the traditionalist doctrine of the Church of Rome from the side of free-thinking. His skepticism and secular humanism were not the avowed and fully-formed infidelity of later times: he but sowed the seeds; he but started the mind of Europe – then just beginning to awake – on the path of philosophic skepticism as well as humanism, leaving the movement to gather way in the following ages. But that he did sow the seeds which future laborers took pains to cultivate, cannot be doubted by those who weigh carefully his teachings on the head of the Trinity, of the person of Christ, of the power of the human will, of the doctrine of sin, and other subjects. And these seeds he sowed widely. He was a man of vast erudition, keen wit, and elegant rhetoric, and the novelty of his views and the fame of his genius attracted crowds of students from all countries to his lectures. He was a man of optimism concerning the power of human reason unaided by divine revelation, including scriptural revelation. Dazzled by the eloquence of their teacher, and completely captivated by the originality and subtlety of his daring genius, these scholars carried back to their homes the views of Abelard, and diffused them, from England on the one side to Sicily on the other. Had Rome possessed the infallibility she boasts, she would have foreseen to what this would grow, and provided an effectual remedy before the movement had gone beyond control.

She did indeed divine, to some extent, the true character of the principles which the renowned but unfortunate teacher was so freely scattering on the opening mind of Christendom. She assembled a Council, and condemned them as erroneous. But Abelard went on as before, the laurel round his brow, the thorn at his breast, propounding to yet greater crowds of scholars his peculiar opinions and doctrines. Rome has always been more lenient to skeptical and humanistic than to evangelical views. And thus, whilst she burned Arnold, she permitted Abelard to die a monk and canon in her communion.

Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274), on the other hand, was a Scholastic who stayed within the mainstream of traditional Romanism. Indeed, Aquinas established the philosophical framework of Romanism, and he is considered by the Catholic church to be her greatest theologian. His system was even declared by Pope Leo XIII (in the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, 1879) to be the official Catholic philosophy.

In reality, Thomistic philosophy (as the philosophy of Aquinas is called) is traditional Romanism humanistically defended. He rejected the Augustinian (and Biblical) notion that for humans faith precedes understanding, insisting instead that human reason has an autonomy of its own. Aquinas' conviction that the existence of God can be discovered by reason is shown by his proofs of the existence of God. His metaphysics relies on the Aristotelian concepts of potency and act, matter and form, being and essence. His moral philosophy is derived from these distinctions as well, since (he argued) the opposite of being does not exist and since (he argued) the good is identical with being, evil is but the absence of good. Aquinas' purported vindication of human reason in support of Romish dogma prevented attempts to suppress the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose works had only recently been rediscovered in the West.

The greatest work of Aquinas was the *Summa Theologica*, and it is the fullest presentation of his views. It consists of three parts. Part i. treats of God, who he calls the "first cause, himself uncaused" (*primum movens immobile*) and as such existent only in act (*actu*), that is pure actuality without potentiality and, therefore, without corporeality. This first part of the *Summa* is summed up in the thought that God governs the world as the "universal first cause." Part ii. treats of ethics. Its theme is man's striving after the highest end, which is the blessedness of the *visio beata*. Here Thomas develops his system of ethics, which has its root in Aristotle. In a chain of acts of will, man strives for the highest end. They are free acts in so far as man has in himself the knowledge of their end and therein the principle of action. In that the will wills the end, it wills also the appropriate means, chooses freely and completes the consensus. Christ is the theme of part iii. According to Aquinas and contrary to scripture, it could not be asserted that the incarnation was absolutely necessary, "since God in his omnipotent power could have repaired human nature in many other ways". Aquinas also argued that the Sacraments are not only signs of sanctification, but bring it about.

Thomistic philosophy owed not only its world conception to Aristotle, but also the frame for his theological system; Aristotle's metaphysics and ethics dictated the trend of his system. Here he gained a framework for his system of thought, namely of God, the rational cause of the world, and man's striving after him. Then he filled this in with the dogmas of the Romish church. In summary, Aquinas' philosophy represents humanism in defense of traditional Romish dogma, whereas Abelard's philosophy represents humanism unconstrained by traditional Romish dogma (albeit still within the pale of the Romish church).

Opposing both the varied strains of humanism of Abelard and of Aquinas were the pre-Protestants of the High Middle Ages. Most notable among these pre-Protestants were the Waldenses. But there were others as well that retained the vital doctrines of grace in

those days, though corrupted by such errors as monasticism. These elect of God, though dispersed over many kingdoms, found a common center in the "one Lord," and a common bond in the "one faith." Through one Mediator did they all offer their worship, and on one foundation did they all rest for forgiveness and the life eternal. They were in short the church – the one church doing over again what she did in the first ages.

It is idle for Rome to say, "I gave you the Bible, and therefore you must believe in me before you can believe in it." The facts we have already narrated conclusively dispose of this claim. Rome did not give us the Bible – she did all in her power to keep it from us; she retained it under the seal of a dead language; and when others broke that seal, and threw open its pages to all, she stood over the book, and, unsheathing her fiery sword, would permit none to read the message of life, save at the peril of eternal anathema.

The pre-Protestants kept the torch of the Bible shining in the darkness of their time. They received it from the primitive church, and carried it down to us. They translated it into the mother tongues of the nations. They colported it over Christendom, singing it in their lays as troubadours, preaching it in their sermons as missionaries, and living it out as Christians. They fought the battle of the Word of God against tradition, which sought to bury it. They sealed their testimony for it at the stake. Their care to keep this torch burning is one of the marks which indubitably certify them as forming part of that one true catholic church, which God called into existence at first by His word, and which, by the same instrumentality, He has, in the conversion of souls, perpetuated from age to age.

Here in the High Middle Ages, we stand at the parting of the ways. From this time we find three great parties and three great schools of thought in Europe and beyond. First, there is the Protestant, in which we behold the Divine principle struggling to disentangle itself from Pagan and Gothic corruptions, and promoting scriptural reformation for the glory of Jesus Christ. Reformed Protestantism recognizes the necessity of faith in God and His word for human understanding, mediated through the word of God. Secondly, there is traditional Romanism, which had now come to make all doctrine to consist in a belief of the Romish Church's inspiration, and all duty in obedience to her dictates and doctrines. And thirdly, there is the Secular Humanistic, which maintains an unjustified esteem in human moral and intellectual capacity, ignoring the harmful effects of the Fall on man's conscience and reason. Humanism has continually failed to recognize the necessity of faith in God's self-revelation of scripture as a pre-condition for true understanding and wisdom. The latter two schools of thought have sought to marginalize and suppress Biblical Protestantism, even working together to destroy this common enemy.

From the expiration of the Apostolic era until the fourteenth century, the second school – traditional Romanism – was the ascendant (albeit not the sole) school of thought in Christendom. The doctrinal purity of the Apostolic church was increasingly undermined in this period, primarily by ignorance and superstition. But at the beginning of the fourteenth century we are about to enter a new epoch of church history when Biblical Protestantism would become the ascendant school of thought in Christendom.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CHAPTER 17 : THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

This second volume in a two-part series on church history is primarily an edited version of the following works on church history and Biblical interpretation:

James A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism* (Cassell & Company, Limited: London, Paris & New York. 1878). (see electronic version at <http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com/Fellowship/James.A.Wylie.html>)

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Let My People Go* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.