

The human race we have distributed into two parts, the one consisting of those who live according to man, the other of those who live according to God. And these we also mystically call the two cities, or the two communities of men, of which the one is predestined to reign eternally with God, and the other to suffer eternal punishment with the devil.

St. Augustine, THE CITY OF GOD

The Medieval Christian World-View

VALUE judgments on the so-called Middle Ages depend on the point of view. The concept of a "middle" age originated with a long line of debunkers from the Italian humanists of the fourteenth century to the French rationalists of the eighteenth. Petrarch may have been the first to designate as "dark" the thousand-year stretch of history following the decline of Rome, but the now familiar idea of a tripartite division of history (ancient—medieval—modern) did not fully crystallize until the first great century of modern science, the seventeenth. During the Enlightenment this idea obtained wide currency. To Voltaire the Middle Ages, far from constituting one of the "four happy ages of history," signified an era of barbarism, irrationality, and superstition. It was generally believed that the study of medieval history had no utility except possibly to remind men of their stupidities. Said Voltaire in his *Essay on Customs*: "It is necessary to know the history of that age only in order to scorn it." "To be learned about [the Middle Ages]," Bolingbroke wrote in 1735, "is a ridiculous affectation in any man who means to be useful to the present age. Down to this aera let us read history: from this aera, and down to our own time, let us study it."¹ From this debunking tradition has stemmed a formidable set of judgments, mostly mistaken, on medieval thought and culture: for instance, that prior to the Renaissance reason was "in prison," that medieval intellectuals had no interest in science or knowledge of the ancient classics, that medieval civilization was, in fact, a gigantic swindle.

Reacting against the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment, the romantics of the early nineteenth century reversed this judgment and peopled the Middle Ages with chivalric knights, pious monks, singing troubadours, skilled craftsmen, and jolly peasants dancing around the Maypole. In *Past and Present* Thomas Carlyle, for instance, contrasted the

¹ *Letters on the Study of History, Works* (Dublin, 1793), vol. II, p. 343.

"Mammon-Gospel" of modern England unfavorably with the social outlook of the twelfth century. And John Ruskin recorded a revolution in artistic taste when he wrote of Gothic architecture that, unlike the Greek and Roman, it is "clothed with a power that can awe the mightiest, and exalt the loftiest of human spirits: an architecture that kindles every faculty in its workman, and addresses every emotion in its beholder."²

Of course, the romantic idealization of the Middle Ages was just as much a perversion of historic truth as the debunking. But if we had to choose between the romantics and the debunkers, we should choose the romantics—because, for all their exaggeration, they at least appreciated the inappropriateness of the term "middle ages," and understood that tradition alone could justify its continued use. Thanks partly to their enthusiasm, partly to the labors of medieval scholars, we can now see the "high" Middle Ages of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries for what it was: a great civilization, which produced the universities, scholasticism, the ideal of chivalry, Gothic art, and some of the loftiest works of the human spirit. No one in his senses will deny what Henry Osborn Taylor called "the spotted actuality" in all this—indeed, what age has ever succeeded in living up to its highest ideals? But neither will anyone now deny (I hope) that on its intellectual and cultural side the Middle Ages marks a *beginning*, and not a mere barren interim between "ancient" and "modern." Medieval historians have recently discovered in the Middle Ages the roots of modern secular civilization. But more important for our purposes, the Middle Ages created the Christian world-view, which did not spend its full strength until the Enlightenment, and which, for better or for worse depending on the point of view, has influenced Western thought and action ever since.

II

TO UNDERSTAND the mind of the High Middle Ages we have to know its social context. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed the beginnings of a social revolution: the revival of town life after centuries of stagnation, the steady rise of population, the genesis of political consolidation (especially in France, England, and Spain), technological improvements in agriculture and manufacture. Yet J. H. Randall's characterization of this society as "a pioneer society, just struggling out of a long past of bitter toil for a bare subsistence"³ still stands. The economy was still basically agrarian. The towns themselves were semi-rural, and were, in any case, but islands in the midst of a vast agrarian sea where the daily round of manorial existence went on without notice-

² *The Stones of Venice* (New York, 1860), vol. III, p. 215.

³ *The Making of the Modern Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), p. 13.

able change. In few towns had the capitalistic mode of production and exchange yet supplanted the gild system. Life expectancy was low, and science did not know how to deal effectively with famine and epidemic. It requires no great stretch of the imagination to see in these conditions one of the causes for the contemporary strength of the Christian Church. Francis Bacon once observed that atheism flourishes in "learned times, specially with peace and prosperity, for troubles and adversities do more bow men's minds to religion."⁴ He might have added that the rise of the Church to a position of cultural dominance coincided with the "Dark Ages" of political decentralization and economic and population decline, and with the continuation, to some extent, of adverse living conditions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

High medieval thought reflects both the nascent social revolution and the agrarian-ecclesiastical civilization. Without the urban revival, the "twelfth-century Renaissance"—the revival of Aristotle and Greek and Arabic science and Roman law, the new mental curiosity and the high level of intellectual sophistication attained in scholastic debate—is simply unthinkable. On the other hand, the intellectual and spiritual prestige of the Church of Hildebrand and Pope Innocent III guaranteed that most of the thinking should be done within a religious framework, and that a major attempt should be made (witness St. Thomas Aquinas and Dante) to explain all knowledge in a religious synthesis. Town and court had only just begun to threaten the clerical monopoly of education, and if the monastery was commencing to lose some of its intellectual lustre, its place was at first taken by the cathedral school and university (in the case of Paris at least, a clerically controlled institution). The intellectual class, small in an age when comparatively few people could even read and write, consisted largely of clergymen, although admittedly not all clergymen were equally clerical-minded. Ernst Troeltsch therefore exaggerates only a little when he says that art and science remained for a long time "closely connected with the Church; in fact, there were no independent secular values of civilization at all which might have felt and claimed a Divine right to exist apart from the Church and her ideals. The only sovereignty that existed was that of the Church; there was no sovereignty of the State, nor of economic production, nor of science or art."⁵

Of the main body of medieval thought it can therefore be said that, to a degree seldom equalled before or since, it was authoritarian, theocentric and theocratic. Other descriptive terms would certainly be "ecclesiastical," "dualism" (in the Platonic rather than the Cartesian sense), "organism," and "hierarchy." Let us see in detail what these words mean. Medieval thought was *authoritarian* in the sense that it usually had recourse to authority—the theology of the Church and a select list of books

⁴ *Essays*, "Of Atheism."

⁵ *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (London, 1931), vol. I, p. 252.

including the Scriptures and Plato and Aristotle (shorn of his heresies)—for its fundamental premises about the world and man. To be sure, the history of medieval rationalism would fill a large volume, and reason sometimes contradicted authority. “Nothing should be believed, save only that which either is self-evident, or can be deduced from self-evident propositions”; “Theology rests upon fables,” were among the 219 propositions condemned in 1277 by the Bishop of Paris who had become alarmed at the spread of Averroist opinions in the University of Paris. Ordinarily, however, reason did not clash with authority, but remained content to speculate on neutral subjects, or else to elucidate and buttress the central faith. Indeed, the main point about the school of St. Thomas Aquinas is its assumption that reason and revelation must, in the end, come to the same thing. The greatest of the medieval philosophers made it his business to harmonize Aristotelianism with Christian theology, and thus to demonstrate to “gentiles” and doubters that reason supported the authoritative tradition. In his opinion, reason properly exercised will rise to the knowledge of divine things, and will show that revealed truth (admittedly “above reason”) is neither irrational nor improbable. Evidently, few medieval intellectuals conceived of knowledge in the modern way, as something expanding and hypothetical. Relying ultimately upon authority past and present, they believed themselves to be already in possession of all the truths that mattered. This is the real significance of those “summas” and “mirrors” in which they delighted, e.g., Aquinas’s *Summa theologica* and Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum majus* which embraced universal knowledge in a single book. How else explain the great vogue of philosophy in the schools—philosophy which, unlike the particular sciences, sought to survey and co-ordinate the whole range of human knowledge.

The prestige of theology, the “realistic” (in the Platonic sense) persuasion of most of the scholastics, the widely acclaimed superiority of the *vita contemplativa*, all attest to the *theocentric* bias in medieval thought. Theology or sacred doctrine clearly ranked first in the hierarchy of learning. “Theology,” said St. Thomas, “transcends other sciences.” “One speculative science is said to be worthier than another, by reason of its certitude, or the dignity of its matter. In both respects this science surpasses other speculative sciences, because the others have certitude from the natural light of human reason, which may err; but this has certitude from the light of the divine knowledge, which cannot be deceived; likewise by reason of the dignity of its matter.” Theology dictated much of the art and history of the Middle Ages, and if philosophy was not exactly its handmaiden, it often fused with it and had to be content to play second fiddle. Theology ranked first because it dealt with first and last things—God, the purpose of creation, man’s destiny; things concerning which the natural reason alone could never have sufficient

knowledge. Of course, this theocentrism by no means precluded interest in man and nature. Medieval thought made man the point of the universe, relating the whole creation to his struggle for salvation. And far from discouraging natural science, the Christian Aristotelians made the knowledge of sensibles a prerequisite for philosophical synthesis. Beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, decorative art, moreover, began to evince considerable interest in natural objects for their own sake. Nevertheless, in medieval humanism man gained dignity only through his relation to the deity. And there can really be no question that for all but a few, the main scientific interest focused on the “final” rather than the “secondary” causes—on *why* rather than *how* nature functioned as it did. This, and its dependence on Aristotle, explains why the Middle Ages made such slow progress toward modern concepts of science.

The strong dash of “realism” in medieval thought further illustrates its theocentricity. By realism is meant, not the modern but the Platonic (and also Aristotelian) doctrine that the objects of sense perception participate in higher realities. Behind our familiar world the scholastics (nominalists excepted) perceived a supersensible world of Ideas and Forms which gave meaning to, and drew into actuality what was only potential in matter. On this view, sense objects are not merely what they seem to be, but are symbols of a more real world of Ideas and Forms of which God is the archetype. Thus, the words of Scripture convey more than the literal meaning—according to St. Jerome, says William Durandus, “we ought to study Holy Scriptures in three ways: firstly, according to the letter; secondly, after the allegory, that is the spiritual meaning; thirdly, according to the blessedness of the future.” Similarly, the Eucharist—by the doctrine of transubstantiation of 1215—was said to consist not only of the “accidents” of the bread and wine, but also of the “substance,” the real body and blood of the Lord, which the senses cannot perceive. Everywhere they looked medieval people saw visible signs of an invisible order. Papacy and Empire embodied the divine unity on earth. In the institution of chivalry the knight’s sword signified the cross, his spear truth, and so on. A book like William Durandus’s *Rationale divinarum officiorum* riots in symbol and figure, and so does the plastic art of the cathedrals. “The church,” Durandus wrote, “consisteth of four walls, that is, is built on the doctrine of the Four Evangelists”; “the foundation is faith, which is conversant with unseen things”; “the door of the church is Christ,” also the lamp and altar. Medieval art, says a modern art historian, “implies a profoundly idealistic view of the scheme of the universe, and the conviction that both history and nature must be regarded as vast symbols.”⁶

This same metaphysic supported asceticism and the sense of the miraculous, and it explains why medieval intellectuals extolled the con-

⁶ Émile Mâle, *Religious Art in France. XIII Century* (London, 1913), p. 15.

templative life. The story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42 was a favorite among medieval writers, and of the two sisters they infinitely preferred the contemplative Mary to the active Martha. For did not Jesus himself say that Mary had chosen the best part: Mary, who fixed her gaze on the face of the Lord, contemplating the eternal truth behind the appearances. And did not Aristotle also say in the tenth book of the *Ethics* (a work much quoted in the thirteenth century) that happiness stood "in perfect rest," that contemplative speculation excelled even virtuous action because it aimed "at no end beyond itself." The contemplation of a static and more than mortal truth—*this* was the ideal of both mystic and philosopher, and it shows how little they grasped the modern conception of knowledge as the means to control and power.

It is true that extreme "realism" began to decline as Aristotelian metaphysics took hold in the schools of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Aristotle, as is well known, brought the Ideas or Forms down to earth and made them work with and in material phenomena. Hence, those scholastics who followed Aristotle closely associated form with matter and grounded knowledge in sensory perception. It should be noted, however, that by no means all the intellectuals became Aristotelians, and what is more important, that the Aristotelian system itself was teleological and theological. The universe, as the Christian Aristotelian envisaged it, had an immaterial cause. God created primary matter and the forms *ex nihilo* (here the account in Genesis was preferred to Aristotle). God was "the efficient, the exemplar and the final cause of all things" who moved creatures to achieve the several ends or purposes for which they were fitted. God constructed the universe on a hierarchical rather than a democratic model. The same laws did not apply everywhere in the cosmos. Between its two parts there existed qualitative differences, the sublunary world of the four elements exhibiting rectilinear motion and hence mutability and decay, the celestial world of the stars circular motion and hence changelessness. The cosmic hierarchy presupposed a psychological hierarchy, the great "chain of being" stretching from God down through the angels and man to the animals and inanimate nature. Man represented the nodal link in this chain; man the microcosm who partook of the nature of both the angels and animals, man for whom the rest of nature had been created. It goes without saying that the creation was not all that there was. Beyond creation was the real world, the supersensory world of God, toward whom all creatures, and especially man, were straining, and in whom they had their being and meaning.

Theocentricity does not necessarily argue *theocracy* but in the High Middle Ages it generally did. Theocracy means literally the rule of society by God and God's agents. More generally, it connotes a social philosophy based upon theological premises in which religion embraces all aspects of human activity and allows no independent secular values to

exist. The theocratic ideal owed its wide acceptance to the fact that it rationalized, to some extent, the actual social scene: the feudal class structure, the absence of organized nationality, the pre-capitalistic economy of most of the towns, and, principally, the rise to power of the sacramental Church. The Church had not always had this ideal. In the early Middle Ages it commonly took the ascetic view that Christ's kingdom was not of this world, that salvation depended upon flight from a world unalterably evil. But as it broadened its missionary effort and acquired feudal properties and successfully asserted its independence, in the Hildebrandine period, of the state, it began to aspire to be "not a sect, but a civilization."⁷ It now argued that the world could not be wholly bad since God had created it, and that the Church must therefore do what it could to organize society on Christian principles. Its claim to theocratic powers rested on the new sacramental theory that divine grace operated objectively through the sacraments—*ex opere operato*, St. Thomas said, and not primarily *ex opere operantis*, and that no one save a duly ordained priest could administer them. "There is indeed one universal Church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved." The Church mediated salvation. Should it not therefore determine what pertained to salvation and thus direct the whole of society?

Medieval social theorists commonly described society on the analogy of the human body. Society, like the human body, was said to consist of organs or parts (clergy, nobility, workers), each of which had its separate function to perform in the life of the whole. On this theory, society was more than the sum of its individual parts. The individual existed but only as part of a class, which in turn had being only in the life of the larger organism, the *Corpus Christianum*. In this system the only equality was religious equality. Hierarchy or "degree" in society corresponded to hierarchy in the cosmos. It followed from the organic analogy, for obviously some organs have functions qualitatively superior to others. It was also explained by Adam's Fall which introduced sin into the world and doomed the majority of men to a menial existence, which they must endure humbly and patiently. The new bourgeoisie did not fit so easily into this snug pattern, but the theocrats devised rules for them too. Economic conduct was declared to be an aspect of personal conduct and hence subject to Christian morality. Avarice is a deadly sin. The merchant must therefore charge for his product only a "just price" which would enable him to live decently in his station. The value of a pair of shoes is not subjective (to be set by the individual seller) but objective (to be fixed by state, town, or guild according to Christian principles).

Medieval theory emphasized social harmony rather than struggle. The modern social reformer would say that it tried to preserve the *status quo* by making it appear to be the unalterable will of God. However that may

⁷R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 1933), p. 19.

be, its stated aim was to eliminate competition between individuals, classes, and states by stressing the common search for God. The ideal was a Christian *Pax Romana*. *Sacerdotium* (the papal Church) and *regnum* (the temporal rulers, chiefly the Holy Roman Emperor), the former being superior to the latter as the soul excels the body, co-operated to achieve on earth a semblance of the unity of the Godhead.

III

MEDIEVAL Christendom took its philosophy of history from St. Augustine. In the *City of God*—and also in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History* and Orosius's *History against the Pagans*—we see history unroll according to divine plan. St. Augustine repudiated the classical conception of time as cyclical recurrence, without beginning or end. "The classical view of the world is a view of things visible, while the Christian 'view' of the world is, after all, not a view but a matter of hope and faith in things invisible."⁸ According to St. Augustine, God created time simultaneously with the world (5,611 years before the capture of Rome by the Goths, in Eusebius's reckoning), and would terminate it with the Last Judgment. There were various schemes of periodization: Eusebius posited three epochs of history, Augustine six corresponding to the six days of Creation, with a seventh as the Sabbath of eternity. But all agreed that time had meaning. Like everything else in creation, human history had a definite purpose or goal. And nobody questioned the absolute decisiveness of Eden and Calvary. In Eden, Adam committed the original sin which condemned the whole human race to perdition. Christ's atonement on the cross for man's sin, and the subsequent foundation of the Church, won God's forgiveness and gave man his second chance. The medieval doctrine of the nature of man made it clear, however, that neither the first Adam nor the second (Christ) determined man's fate completely. Despite its protestations to the contrary, the authoritative Church Council of Orange of 529 really took the semi-Pelagian rather than the Augustinian position. By Adam's sin man's free will was declared to be "attenuated" but not extinguished. "This we believe according to the Catholic faith, that with the grace received through baptism aiding and cooperating, all who are baptized in Christ can and ought, *if they will strive faithfully*,⁹ to fulfill what pertains to the salvation of the soul." In other words, human choice also counted in the historical drama of salvation. To sum up, the medieval philosophy of history focused on God's Providence and man's pilgrimage toward the ultimate *telos*, paying scant attention to "secondary causes" or secular

⁸ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1949), pp. 165-6.

⁹ My italics.

events as such. History was the record, not of progress in earthly happiness, but of man's struggle, inevitably involving suffering, to overcome evil and find God.

It must not be supposed, however, that medieval religious thought dealt only in fear and gloom. The fear is there, no question about it: one has only to look at the forbidding representations of the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment in the cathedrals. But there was also plenty of "Christian optimism," notably in Christian prayer and theology. The note of penitential dread so conspicuous in early medieval prayer gives way to a mood of joyful thanksgiving and mystical love of God in the prayers of Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Francis of Assisi. And theology repudiated the pessimistic teaching of Manicheism which represented the world as the creation of the King of Darkness, and history as a conflict between the forces of darkness and light. The God of Christian theology not only made the world good, he ruled the world—he *cared*, as not even Aristotle's God cared, about what happened to it, and especially to man.