

The High Middle Ages

INTRODUCTION

Life in the Middle Ages seems quaint – the stuff of Hollywood movies. Think of Richard Burton as Becket, Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn as Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine in *The Lion in Winter*, Laurence Olivier or Kenneth Branagh charging “once more into the breach” as Henry V, and, above all, of Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland as Robin and Marian in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. When we think of the Middle Ages, we think of pageantry and Crusades, of epic struggles between Pope and Emperor, of the feats of chivalry – in short, we think of a lost world when knighthood was in flower and maidens lost their heads, a time when men were exquisitely sensitive about slights to their honor, over which they were prepared to fight like adolescent schoolboys. Well, much of this sort of tomfoolery did occur, but it was not what the time was really about. The story of the Middle Ages is not the story of chivalry, but of the transformation of European civilization – its economy, culture and political life – occasioned by the rise of a new class that would come to dominate global society to the present day. It is the story of the emergence and rise of the merchant bourgeoisie and the beginnings of market capitalism.

However, before we get to market capitalism, we do need to traverse the romantic and sanguinary terrain of the world of chivalry. We begin with two great military achievements: the conquest of England by William, Duke of Normandy in 1066; and the capture of Jerusalem as part of the victorious First Crusade against the infidel. The unintended consequences of these chivalric successes will be the growth of the national monarchy in Britain and France and the expansion of trade – both of which will lead to the overthrow of aristocratic ideals of honor and chivalry in favor of bourgeois rationality in commerce and statecraft finally culminating in the overthrow of the *ancien regime* in the French revolution. What was ultimately involved was the substitution of 'merit' for the advantages of birth and breeding as the means of social advancement.

In any attempt to understand the culture of the Middle Ages, one can't avoid being struck by the dominating presence and overwhelming power of the Church with its Gothic cathedrals, Crusades and Inquisition. All of this was only made possible by money. For the High Middle Ages, the essential story is the transforming effect of money on a society that, for the most part, had previously done without it – followed by the rise of the town, the national monarchy and the Papacy at the expense of the emperor

and the landed, military aristocracy.

The Eleventh Century Conquests of Norman Chivalry

The Vikings of the early Middle Ages had been the terrorists of their time. The military defenses of Europe were helpless against the sudden and unpredictable guerilla assaults of these fierce brigands. At first, these Northmen were merely piratical raiding bands who plundered the poorly protected coasts of Ireland and England, and destroyed and pillaged helpless settlements before carrying their spoils home to Norway and Denmark. However, they soon organized fleets of several hundred ships, seized coastal lands and proceeded to winter there. Raiders prowled along the coasts of Spain, and even into the Mediterranean. However, the King of France did negotiate with terrorists. He gave them the territory of Normandy as a fiefdom and made their chieftain its Duke. In time, the Duke of Normandy became more powerful than the king himself, and finally, in 1066, became King of England as William I, the Conqueror. In that year, a bright light prophetically appeared in the heavens. It was reported to be four times the size of Venus with a brightness equal to a quarter of that of the moon. Since people customarily saw the hand of God in what we would regard as natural anomalies, it is hardly surprising that this celestial visitation caused them to anticipate momentous changes in European life – and they were right. The phenomenon, that we know as Halley's Comet, was depicted on the Bayeaux Tapestry as foretelling the conquest of England by William, Duke of Normandy.

William was the first ruler in Europe to mold the feudal order into a strong, centralized monarchy. He controlled the lands of the old Anglo-Saxon royal house by right of conquest and was thus far more wealthy and powerful than any of his vassals. Also, he had inherited an efficient system of taxation from his Anglo-Saxon predecessors, and he introduced greater efficiency into government, notably conducting a census of his realm and recording the data in what has become known as the *Domesday Book*. He used his powers to forbid private warfare among his barons. As a result, England became, by eleventh century standards, an exceptionally peaceful and well administered kingdom – demonstrating the potential of the strong central monarchy as a civilizing institution in European life.

The conquest of England by William, Duke of Normandy had two very important long-term consequences. The first was that it tied England to French as opposed to Scandinavian culture. Indeed, England became a cultural dependency of France. Second, because the Duke of Normandy and his descendants were vassals of the French king, and would develop dynastic claims on the French throne itself; the king of England became inextricably involved in French political life – a cause, or at least a pretext, for the series of conflicts collectively known as The Hundred Years War

(1337-1453).

Meanwhile, on the continent, one of the great soap operas of medieval history was about to be played out: the conflict between pope and emperor that would culminate in the snow of Canossa in 1077. The ninth and tenth centuries had been an ignominious time for the Papacy. The popes were generally a miserable lot, and the papacy had become the political pawn of feuding Roman noble families. Monastic discipline too had broken down, and church offices were bought and sold on the open market. The need for reform found a response not in Rome but in Burgundy, with a revitalization of the monastic movement – most notably at the Abbey of Cluny, founded in 910. Out of this reform movement would emerge a series of strong and capable popes culminating in the emergence of Gregory VII who would elevate the power and authority of the Papacy to the apex of its history.

The Holy Roman Emperor lent powerful support to the cause, and used his military power to impose reform on a corrupt church. However, this very support was viewed as an illicit interference into the functioning of the church by a lay man, and a challenge to the supremacy that the Pope now claimed over all secular rulers. Matters came to a head over the emperor's determination to appoint bishops in his territories in Germany. He needed such authority because his bishops were also secular princes. Gregory, of course, understood this perfectly well. However, he regarded the destruction of imperial power as insignificant in the eternal scheme of things and refused to compromise with emperor Henry IV. Gregory excommunicated Henry and declared him deposed. In order to maintain political power in a Germany in which the church owned one third of all landed property, Henry needed to be reconciled with the papacy. Thus, he traveled to the pope at Canossa where, barefoot and gowned in penitent's garb, he endured the winter snow for three days until Gregory was sufficiently appeased by the emperor's humiliation, and graciously admitted the emperor into his presence to kiss his toe and beg a forgiveness that he deigned to grant.

Soon, Henry again opposed the pope, and was again excommunicated. However, this time, he responded by marching on Rome and appointing an anti-pope. "Gregory begged the aid of Robert Guiscard, the Norman ruler of southern Italy. Robert ...drove Henry from Rome, and then subjected the city to a thoroughgoing pillage, selling thousands of Romans into slavery. Gregory, abandoned by most of his cardinals and execrated by the people, left Rome with the Norman army and died in exile." (Morris Bishop, *The Middle Ages*, p.44).

A decade after the death of Gregory, the papacy and the chivalric orders of Europe combined to launch the first crusade. The Seljuk Turks had captured Jerusalem and were harassing the Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. Pope Urban II responded with a call for a war for the

liberation of Palestine from the infidel. The first crusade began in 1096. Because the Turks were then at odds with the Arab caliphate in Baghdad, the country was poorly defended and the crusaders were able to take Jerusalem in 1099. They immediately began to massacre its inhabitants – a barbaric horror that seemed to display a bloodthirsty Christian fanaticism that in turn provoked Islam's own fanatics.

Soon after Jerusalem was captured, most of the crusading army declared "Mission accomplished" and went home, leaving only a couple thousand troops to control a hostile land. In time there was a social intermixing between crusader and native population, resulting in a degree of accommodation and mutual tolerance. The crusaders "had their mutual friends among the native gentry and would hunt, joust and feast with them. They took their religion easily, with a tolerant smile for the excessive devotions of other Christians newly arrived in the East. They set aside chapels in their churches for Moslem worship, and the Moslems reciprocated by installing Christian chapels in their mosques. [The Moslems under Saladin re-captured Jerusalem in 1187.] In 1198 the great Innocent III acceded to the papacy and promoted another expedition, the lamentable fourth crusade. [At the urging of Venice and the connivance of the pope, the crusaders moved not against the infidel, but against the Christian capital of Constantinople and took the city on April 12, 1204.] The three day spree that followed is memorable in the history of looting...In Santa Sophia they drank from the altar vessels while a prostitute sat on the patriarch's throne and sang ribald French soldier's songs. The emperor, regarded as a wicked usurper, was taken to the top of a high marble column and pushed off." (Morris Bishop, *The Middle Ages*, p.90ff.) The fourth crusade fatally weakened the Byzantine defenses against the Ottoman Turks to whom they eventually succumbed in 1453. There were to be a total of nine crusades before this pointless slaughter ended in 1272 with the Holy Lands still lost to Christendom. What a bloody, pointless, awful farce!

The crusades were the last hurrah of feudal chivalry. Ironically, their very important lasting effects – stimulation of commerce and expansion of the European world view in terms of geography, cultural possibilities, stimulus to literature and invention – all advanced the interests of precisely the institutions that would displace all the dominant organizational structures of the aristocratic feudal order. The Pope, the knight and the emperor would all be made irrelevant with the emergence of the national monarchy, the royal army and bureaucracy, and the bourgeoisie that would bankroll the army, staff the royal bureaucracy and substitute the principle of meritocracy for lineage as the basis of wealth and power. This was a very gradual transformation, one that pervades not only the High Middle Ages, but that continued for centuries and still dominated post-Napoleonic nineteenth century French history up to the

advent of the Third Republic in 1870.

Of course these developments would not be visible to even the most astute observer in the eleventh century as the truly significant aspects of one's own time are almost impossible to discern with any confidence – a fact that should give us pause, but seldom does. No, a person living in the eleventh century would take for granted a world that was almost entirely rural and agricultural – one in which food, clothes, and shelter had to be produced in the immediate neighborhood. If there was to be a revival of European civilization, it had to start from this simple agrarian basis. Indeed, the dramatic enhancement in living standards that marked the High Middle Ages were initially the result of a variety of agricultural technical advances.

Norman Cantor imagines a monk traveling across Europe in the eleventh century. The picture he paints is worth capturing: "From Normandy, the English monk crossed into Flanders where he visited several great monasteries. While he was in Flanders, he became aware for the first time of the existence of a kind of people he had not known before, people who lived in walled towns and were called bourgeois. These people were neither adjunct to the cathedral clergy nor the servants of the lords; they constituted a new group in medieval society. The English monk had known of only three social classes – those who fought, those who prayed and those who labored – but these bourgeois made their living from the manufacture and sale of woolen cloth, some of which was taken by merchants to fairs in Champagne, where it was sold and exported to Italy and other distant countries. The background of many bourgeois was obscure; some came from the lower ranks of the knightly class, while others were said to have been of servile origin. The bourgeois were not a pleasant people. They were insecure, fearful, and at the same time clever and determined. They appeared avaricious and not a little dishonest, but at the same time extremely devout and pious in an intense, individual way that puzzled the simple monk from Yorkshire. These bourgeois, who stood outside the whole traditional social structure, had no political power, and their standing in the law courts was still not settled. One thing they did have was an enormous amount of hard cash, and they used this money not only to build strong walls around their urban enclaves, to erect municipal churches, and to build moderately comfortable houses in the crowded, narrow and filthy streets of their cities, but to buy from the count of Flanders extensive rights of self-government." (Norman F. Cantor; *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*; p. 237f.)

The Twelfth Century: The Age of Bernard of Clairvaux and Henry II

In one of his satirical folk songs, Tom Paxton laments that among other

tribulations of daily life like blizzards, floods, droughts and ivy league football; we now in this country face the terrible scourge of one million lawyers. Well, he can blame it all on the Middle Ages, since the professional lawyer is a product of the twelfth century.

An agricultural society without cash crops has no need of lawyers. In such a society everyone is personally known to all of his neighbors, knows his place and what is expected of him. Behavioral expectations are understood by anyone who is not ignorant – a rural pejorative whose scornful disdain continues to the present day. Such was the state of affairs in most of Europe until the revival of trade and the growth of cities. There was no need for legal uniformity when all relationships were local. However, once one's commercial life began to involve multiple communities and even foreign nations, a rationalized and uniform legal practice became imperative. One now needed lawyers who had the analytic skills to codify the law and to apply it to commercial transactions, as well as the ability to staff the bureaucracies of the national monarchies and of the church itself. Almost all of the popes of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries were trained in the law.

An analogous intellectual style came to dominate the intellectual life of the time with the rediscovery of the writings of Aristotle and the development of scholastic philosophy. The first great champion of analytic intellectual combat was Peter Abelard. As yet only a partial translation of Aristotle's logic was available. Throughout the century, this trickle would swell into a mighty river as the work of translation proceeded apace. Finally, it would flood the arid plain of the intellectual life of the time and constitute a formidable threat to orthodoxy that was only tamed by the baptism of Aristotle by Thomas Aquinas.

Aristotle's thought was problematic because it posited a deity who does not participate actively in the world which he did not even have the courtesy to create *ex nihilo*; a God who is unresponsive to prayer and repentance, and who does not grant individual immortality. However, Aristotle did offer what was, by far, the best science of the time; and religious thinkers, then as now, had only three choices: to reject Aristotle, to argue that his thought was somehow congruent with the faith or to adopt the position known, as the two truths doctrine, that faith and science constitute separate realms that do not overlap, and thus, can never be in conflict. All three of these approaches would be pursued in the course of the Middle Ages. However, the one that became the official position of the Church is the great synthesis of St. Thomas Aquinas – an enormous legal brief defending the claim of Aristotelian Reason against the charge that it was heretical. To me, there seems little doubt that, in order to baptize Aristotle, Thomas had to grossly distort Aristotle's essential thought. However, he did not do this in the service of the faith. The hegemony of the Christian worldview would not be seriously challenged until the

scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rather, Thomas was seeking to carve an acceptable realm for the independent exercise of human reason along side of revelation – on the condition that it not contradict the teaching of the Church whose Magisterium remained supreme.

Aquinas represents the culmination of an intellectual ferment that begins with Abelard, who is best known not for his intellectual challenge to orthodoxy, but for the surgical strike he endured as a result of his love affair with Heloise, one of his students. She became pregnant and Abelard married her. Nevertheless, her uncle defended his honor, if not hers, by sending a gang of hoodlums to, as Abelard put it, "deprive me of that part of my anatomy which had offended him." Abelard and Heloise spent the remainder of their lives in monastic life and the love letters they exchanged over the years are an enduring contribution to the literature of romantic love.

On this sublimated level, Abelard used the analytic logic of Aristotle to challenge the prevailing philosophical orthodoxy of the day. Always good at making enemies, he outdid himself this time, and the prosecutor at his trial for heresy was none other than Bernard of Clairvaux, the leading churchman of the age. St. Bernard attacked Abelard and the new learning as motivated merely by intellectual curiosity. As such, it was an act of vanity, a distraction from the pure conscience and humble faith that alone provided the path to salvation. Abelard was only saved by the friendship of the powerful abbot of Cluny who offered him the haven where he ended his last years in relative quiet.

In addition to Abelard's importance in the abstruse realms of theology and epistemology, he was also important in what might be called the re-discovery of personality. In an age of therapy, self expression and Oprah, we take this for granted. However, from "the third century on, there had been little or no recognition of human personality. The real person, with unique characteristics, had been obliterated by the Platonic concern with ideal types. Early medieval culture had little appreciation for personality; only representative type seen under the aspect of eternity and religion was portrayed in literature." (Cantor, Norman; *Civilization of the Middle Ages*, p. 331.) Indeed, there were no portraits as we know them, and the artist's sketch book was unknown. Artists worked from standardized collections of ideal types and never drew from nature. A portrait of a knight was not expected to be an actual likeness of a real person, but merely to display the ideal of knighthood in an stylized manner.

As already mentioned, Abelard's adversary was the formidable Bernard of Clairvaux. He was the leading Cistercian reformer of his time who abhorred what he viewed as the moral indulgence and disciplinary laxity of Cluny. He was also an aesthetic puritan who objected to the ornamentation of the Romanesque stone carvers as a frivolity that

distracted from the solemn business of salvation. No one could accuse this worthy monk (who preached the second crusade and was the self-appointed scourge of Popes and kings and the redoubtable Eleanor of Aquitaine) of being frivolous. And yet, though he seemed to be the essence of a sound man, the implications of his position were, in their own way, as corrosive of established orthodoxy as the views of Peter Abelard. He certainly wanted to morally reform Europe along Christian principles. However, he believed above all in direct religious experience of the loving soul in communion with God in an endeavor "'to know Jesus, and to know Jesus crucified' – not Christ in heaven, but in self-sacrifice . . . St. Bernard played the leading role in the development of the Virgin cult which is one of the most important manifestations of the popular piety of the twelfth century ...By raising the puritan saint above the ministers of Christ . . . he annunciated the doctrines that were to form the common ethos of the popular heresies. Bernard gave to medieval Catholicism a new emotional dimension that enriched and revitalized it." (Cantor, Norman; *Civilization of the Middle Ages*, p. 341ff) Much as another earnest monk, Martin Luther, was to revitalize it in 1517.

While the philosophers and theologians were disputing the respective places of reason and faith, secular politicians were doing the unprincipled, ruthless and sometimes devious things necessary to promote the power of secular national monarchies. The most important figure in this process is Henry II of England. However, it is inaccurate and misleading to think of Henry as the *king* of England. He was actually Emperor of the vast Angevin Empire, which numbered the Kingdom of England as one of its territories. Henry was one of the great personalities of the Middle Ages: a charismatic leader, consummate statesman and administrator of genius, who was blessed as well with a very long reign. He ruled from 1154 to 1189. In addition to successfully maintaining a great empire, he was primarily responsible for replacing the violent anarchy of baronial domination in England with the promulgation of English common law and the reach of the king's justice. It was only this national monarchy that could effectively impose the law and order of royal justice against the bullying of the nobles, constantly feuding about 'honor' while they brought death and destruction to helpless peasants. To this end, "Henry effectively destroyed the jurisdiction of the private feudal courts . . .[and] greatly expanded the use of the sworn inquest, or jury in civil suits, and he introduced the indicting grand jury in criminal cases . . . Henry's marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine brought him a principality that, when joined to his other possessions, made him the ruler of most of the western half of France..." (Cantor, Norman; *Civilization of the Middle Ages*, p. 398f.) "He scrutinized closely the sheriffs, ensuring that they were, first and foremost, reliable agents of his will, often with legal training rather than merely military experience. By the end of the twelfth century, England had the

most sophisticated and effective monarchy in Europe. It was served by a body of professional servants who moved easily between shire, court, and Westminster at the king's command: they may be pardonably be described as a royal bureaucracy. (*The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Monarchy* p.156 ff).

The only opposition Henry ever experienced came from his wife, and from his friend and chancellor, Thomas á Becket. Henry had enthusiastically appointed his friend to replace the incumbent Archbishop of Canterbury, thinking thereby to cement his hold on an English hierarchy that was already loyal to him. This somewhat cynical ploy proved too clever by half when Becket, as an English bishop, did something practically unheard of then and now. He got religion – and not only religion, but a form of religion that caused him to attempt to limit the king's power over the Church, far beyond anything desired by either the English hierarchy or by the Pope himself. It would seem that Thomas was regarded as a nuisance by everyone – up to and including the Pope. Finally, Henry impulsively blurted out that he wished that someone would rid him of this nuisance. Some barons took him at his word, and murdered Becket at the altar of his cathedral. At this point, the Pope discovered that a dead nuisance can make a useful martyr, and he used Becket's death to exact concessions from Henry, including the legal privilege known as 'benefit of clergy' that exempted clerics from trial in secular courts. As the Boston Archdiocese would say: those were the good old days.

"The Irish Church had consistently declined to follow the doctrines of the Church of Rome. In 1155 the Pope gave dispensation to Henry II to bring them into line. Henry assembled an invasion force and in 1171 accepted the submission of his nobles in Ireland and the Irish kings and bishops. Although not a conquest of the whole country, this marked the beginning of more than 700 years of English rule in Ireland." (*The Kings and Queens of England and Scotland* by Plantagenet Somerset Fry, p. 41).

In May 1152, Henry married Eleanor of Aquitaine, who had previously been married to the King of France. Eleanor was as rich, passionate, charismatic and as energetic as her husband, but their marriage was an unhappy one. After the couple fell out, she constantly encouraged her sons to rebel against their father, and thus Henry kept Eleanor in a state of virtual imprisonment for the last fifteen years of his reign. However, she outlived him, played a very important role in the rule of both of her sons: Richard the Lion Hearted and John Lackland, and died in 1204 at the age of eighty-two. Eleanor's abortive efforts to overthrow Henry did little harm, but his empire would be decimated by the incompetence of the sons that she bore him.

After Henry died, he was succeeded by Richard, who kept himself harmlessly busy in pursuit of military honor, and then by John who managed to lose almost all of the French possessions while gaining a place

in the history books by so alienating the aristocracy and enfeebling royal power that he was forced to agree to the so-called Magna Carta ('Great Charter') – an assertion of aristocratic privilege curiously enshrined in English political mythology as a monument to civil liberty. What is perhaps more significant is that the loss of French possessions brought both England and France to their permanent national borders. They became the first two national monarchies and exemplified the governmental structure of the nation state that was to dominate political life up to our own day. In the Renaissance, they would be joined by Spain, while Germany and Italy would remain mere geographical expressions until they finally achieved nationhood in the nineteenth century.

The Thirteenth Century: God and Mammon

The Inquisition

At the end of the twelfth century, the Church was the most important political and religious institution in Europe and was on the verge of establishing a European theocracy controlling both spiritual and temporal hegemony in Christendom. Heresy was a challenge to its power and it was particularly threatened when heretical ideas were supported by temporal rulers – a situation that was to come to pass in the worst possible way centuries later in Reformation Germany and the England of Henry VIII. In the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III faced a smaller version of this sort of threat from the Cathars in Southern France. The Cathars were protected by local nobles and bishops who resented papal authority. In response, the papacy attempted to convert the Cathars through the preaching talents of the Dominicans and the Franciscans. When they persisted in doctrinal error, Pope Innocent organized the twenty year struggle known as the Albigensian Crusade in the early thirteenth century. When the French crown assumed leadership of the crusade, it was successful in defeating the supporters of the Cathars. In order to rid the region of heresy, Pope Gregory IX, who viewed heresy as equivalent to treason, instituted the Inquisition as an instrument of repression that was to endure in one form or another for several hundred years.

Much has been said in the past few years about the evils of terrorism; but what is rarely noted is that the term originally referred to repression by governing authorities attempting to control the thoughts and actions of the populations over which they ruled. This is true whether rule by terror was practiced in revolutionary France, Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia – or by the religious authorities in medieval and early modern Europe in Italy, France, Spain and Geneva Switzerland.

Sometimes when reading scholarly and apologetic works on the Inquisition, one is impressed by the capacity of erudition to obscure

essential reality. One reads learned discussions of the history of the inquisitorial approach to criminal justice administration, of the processes in place to minimize procedural error, of the efforts made to limit the prosecution of the innocent, and of the laudable attempts of the papacy to professionalize the prosecution of heresy by placing it in the hands of theological specialists in the Dominican order. In all of this erudition, one can almost be lulled into forgetting that we are talking about pleasing God by burning people alive, because they disagree on some possibly obscure point of theology – and refuse to grant the religious authorities the right to tell them what to believe. If such a public community spectacle as an *Auto-da-fe* were practiced by non Europeans, we would call them savages who propitiate their Gods with human sacrifice. It should be noted in passing that even Stalin and Hitler neither burned people alive nor turned their persecutions into entertaining public spectacles. As a leading Inquisitor decreed with approval, an "Auto-da-fe is a sight which fills the spectator with terror and is an awful picture of the last judgment. Such fear and such sentiments should be inspired in the viewer and are fraught with the greatest advantages." (Nicholas Eymerich, *Directorium Inquisitorium* quoted in *The Inquisition* by Deborah Bachrach.)

Christianity began as a persecuted faith, a theological revolt against legalistic religious authority in the name of a gospel of love. It now became thoroughly organized and intolerantly regimented. More than this, it became a vision of panic and fear, a worship of a terrifying God just looking for an excuse to condemn people to eternal agony in the fires of Hell; while also insisting that we proclaim His love and mercy and our own love and devotion towards Him. Human beings are easily frightened and, in some sense, ultimately remain overgrown children who can be moved by the infantile terrors of fairy tales. When we are thus frightened we form hysterical mobs that do frightful things in the name of God or patriotism. And so, then as now, we are always in danger of becoming the dupes of those oppressive powers who forbid us to question authority. Yet any authority that cannot be questioned in perfect safety is tyrannical.

In thinking about the Inquisition, there still tends to be an excess of moral and cultural relativism to the effect that one cannot expect Innocent III to be a liberal, and should not be surprised that he would have different views from ours. The implication seems to be that the two sets of moral assumptions are equivalent. It is true that Innocent III could not help but be a bigot, because he was raised to be a bigot and his society was bigoted; but that neither makes it right nor does it excuse us from taking the stand that it is still bigotry, still cruel and still wrong. Liberals can acknowledge that truth comes out of a free exchange of ideas and that our own ideas of tolerance and liberty are open to challenge like any other ideas. However, that does not excuse us from the vigorous articulation and assertion of our own ideas and commitments. Put differently, truth or rationality may very

well be the current structure of a conversation of integrity at any given time; however that conversation cannot have integrity unless all sides frankly and vigorously, as well as respectfully, assert their own cognitive beliefs and moral commitments. It is true that moral absolutes may be difficult, or even impossible to identify. However, it is certainly possible, and usually easy, to specify moral default positions such as the rejection of cruelty and intolerance. Surely, such positions are wrong, all things being equal, even if not always and everywhere.

Money and Meritocracy

What time is it? The question, like so much that we take for granted, would have been meaningless in Europe before the thirteenth century when the introduction of the weight driven mechanical clock altered men's conception of time by dividing day and night into twenty-four equal hours. Likewise, we take for granted a society in which we would not leave home without money to get through the day – or at least with a bank card that would allow us to easily obtain necessary funds. It takes some effort to imagine a society in which this was not the case, where monetary transactions were rare, where upward mobility was virtually non-existent, where one's place in the social order was determined by that of one's parents. The social hierarchy had been determined by God for all eternity in what was viewed as a “great chain of being” in which the lowly place of most of the population, like that of the animals, had been as immutably determined. If one were in the very small minority of the nobility and higher clergy who, by divine right, actually ran the society, one also took for granted one's unmerited superiority and entitlement.

Now one must try to imagine the disruptive effects of the introduction of money and commercial profit into such a traditional society – a novel form of wealth that would not necessarily be distributed, as God was supposed to have intended, along the lines of established authority. Fickle fortune might very well make some upstart nobody the wealthy creditor of an impoverished noble. Further, this upstart, little better than an outlaw buccaneer with the business ethics of a brigand, would be of a class that regarded themselves as free men. These legal and social nobodies would create a new legal framework – that of towns run by upstarts. They would also form political alliances with the King who, in return for their support would support them against the aristocracy. Further, the aristocracy would now be gradually replaced at court by those very nobodies with vulgar birth merely because they were better trained and more capable administrators. Indeed, centuries later, Napoleon would extend this radical principle of merit promotion to the military itself, if one can imagine such a thing. Where will it end? Why, some day the royal palace in Paris might be turned into a public art gallery filled with vulgar Japanese tourists; and The Tower of London, built by order of William the Conqueror, might

become nothing more than a tourist attraction for people who, at the beginning of our period would have known their divinely appointed place of subordination to a lord and master with arbitrary, virtually unchecked power over their persons. He could scourge them in the name of justice, trample their crops in the sport of warfare, and exploit their labor in the service of his status and comfort.

It's the beginning of this epochal struggle – between an aristocracy of birth and breeding, challenged by a middle class promoting a ruthless meritocracy – that is the most significant fruit of the High Middle Ages. The victory of that middle class was to take hundreds of years. In the nineteenth century, it would involve class struggle in England and nearly a century of bloody revolution in France. However, there could be little doubt of the final outcome for anyone who realizes that in any viable society, political power is held by those who control the most important forms of non-political power. When the aristocracy had a monopoly on military prowess, and the Church was not only the greatest land owner in Europe, but also had a nearly exclusive pipeline to God (who, as all traditional Catholics know, only speaks Latin); they could together rule society and enjoy their petty and ultimately irrelevant squabbles over their respective claims to political and cultural superiority. As their society discovered that it could dispense with their special merits, their claims became increasingly tendentious. Ultimately, these privileged classes mostly merged with the merchant plutocracy – in England through a prosaic process of gradual political reform, in France through the more operatic approach of violence and revolution.

But all this was in the distant future. "A reflective European of the year 1300 would have been entitled to look on his world with a good deal of satisfaction. Progress during two centuries had been constant, even, if one came to think of it, amazing. The land was dotted with new towns and cities, secure behind their walls, adorned with noble churches, and filled with comfortable homes . . . Food was cheap and plentiful, as a result of intensive agriculture . . . Business was good; the roads and seaways were usually open . . . The kings had more or less settled down behind borders determined by race and language; they had, in general, gained power enough to keep their turbulent nobles in check. The long disaster of the crusades had ended and had been succeeded by a booming trade with the East . . . The peasants, borne on a rising tide of prosperity, were probably better off than they would be again for centuries." (Morris Bishop, *The Middle Ages* p.331ff).