
The Medieval Mind: A Meditation

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Entering into the mind of the medieval world is very difficult for moderns. There is a vast mental and psychological distance between the twenty-first century and the middle ages. The latter were drenched in mysticism, whereas the contemporary world has been shaped by rationalism so that mystical concepts and experiences have been stripped away except among a small number of people steeped in the religious thought of our Western ancestors. I was reminded of this in reading a brief history of the Abbey of Conques in the Auvergne region of France, a church that serves pilgrims who are walking on the ancient route from Le Puy to Santiago de Compostella—one of the historic pilgrimage routes of Christians.

The original church, constructed at the end of the ninth century, housed the relics of St. Foy, which inspired great devotion. Though Christianity remained a very strong force more than a thousand years

later, today the cult of relics and the pilgrimages associated with them no longer play a significant role in the lives of Christians. It can be argued that the decline of pilgrimages is a loss to Christian spiritual life in an age of unbelief and immorality when people have a profound need for spiritual examples.

Awareness of the Christian martyrs also has diminished considerably even for those whose faith is in the Catholic tradition. It is not clear whether this is because of the widespread de-Christianization in Western Europe or whether it is itself a contributing cause of the de-Christianization. This diminishing awareness is all the more disturbing since there may have been more martyrs in the twentieth century than in any previous century of the Christian epoch. To appreciate this, one has only to bear in mind the vast number of Christians murdered by the Nazis and the Russian, Eastern Bloc, and Chinese Communists. Many years

ago I gained insight into this subject when I came to know a Belgian Jesuit who had been a missionary in China when the country was overrun by Mao Tse-tung's Communists. He said that his Chinese assistants were seized by the Communists and that he, Father de Jaeger, was forced to watch while they were buried alive. Countless Christians also were massacred in Uganda, the Congo, Sudan, Rwanda, and other African countries. These are only the recent victims of religious persecution. Many priests and nuns were martyred in the Spanish Civil War, the Mexican Revolution, and other oppressive conflicts of the twentieth century.

The blood of martyrs was spilled in many parts of the world in the last century. Despite this sad history, the faith of people in most parts of Europe was not reinforced as it was in Poland and certain other Eastern countries brutalized by persecution of Christians.

St. Foy in France was martyred in 303 in Emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians. Four centuries later, Christians were besieged by the conquering Muslims who had spilled into Spain and made a deep penetration of France until halted by Charles Martel at Poitiers in 731. A grille in the church at Conques reportedly was made of the chains placed on Christians who had been prisoners of the Moors.

Another loss in our time is the practice of monasticism on a large scale. Commencing during the early centuries when Christians were persecuted, monasticism continued

to flourish in succeeding centuries when the traditional Roman social order had broken down and cities collapsed under barbarian pressure. The monasteries served as spiritual enclaves in a disordered world and also made possible the safeguarding of relics.

Dr. Peter Brown of Princeton University observes that monasticism arose in the fourth century and "brought a new element into the moral and social attitudes of the late antique Christian world." The Greek word for monks means the "lonely ones." Dr. Brown notes that the monk personified the ancient ideal of singleness of heart.

What Dr. Brown calls "the monastic paradigm" was developed in the overwhelmingly rural environment of the Middle Ages when few people were exposed to the "bright lights" of cities. Christian monasticism sought to create a world without the structures and enticements of urban existence. It was a parallel world to the other Christian world that developed in the Hellenistic cities of the Roman empire, where St. Paul and other apostles had established the first Christian congregations.

Modern Christians, living in a highly urbanized world, adhere to the early model of urban Christian life. The order established for monks living in the abbeys required adherence to a very rigorous daily regime, quite apart from the limitations imposed by a celibate existence. The monks were committed to a routine of prayer that was very demanding—matins, prime, tierce, sext, nones, ves-

pers, and compline. Then there were the arduous tasks required to feed the monastic community.

The life of praise, worship, work, and scholarship was designed to magnify God. That this monastic life continues to exist at all amidst the undemanding secular life of the contemporary world is truly remarkable. But one can understand why the number of people who commit themselves to monasticism is very small in a world given over to entertainment and other enticements, plus an extraordinary degree of sexual liberty.

The loss of an ever-present monastic world deprives the secular world, including those who adhere to a less arduous Christian existence, of a very strong model of singleness of spirit. It may be, of course, that the future will experience conditions that will lead people to return to monasticism on a large scale. This is not an illusory notion since millions of people in the former European communist world have returned to Christianity after seventy-five years of militant atheistic indoctrination and persecution of Christians.

There is almost no end to the differences between the world of today and the world of the Middle Ages, indeed between the modern world and the world in which mankind had lived since the dawn of consciousness. A fundamental difference is the existence of artificial light available at all hours in almost all places. The world in which the medieval mind was shaped was a world of darkness after the sun went

down. This meant that journeys could not begin until daylight and had to cease after daylight faded. Farmers had to return from the fields at this time and markets had to shut down. Worship in the churches was conducted in darkness by torchlight or by a few candles. The worshipers, of course, were largely illiterate. They would not be reading from a prayer book or hymnal. Most of the monks sang the offices from memory. When there was light in the skies, it made possible the marvel of the great stained glass windows. Worship conducted in darkness undoubtedly made the liturgical rites all the more mysterious. And the golden chalices and church paintings were all the more necessary for worship in the hours of bright light. Accustomed as moderns are to abundant light, the conditions of life in the medieval era are for them difficult to imagine. What is done in darkness is inherently full of mystery. We need to make a great mental and psychological effort, therefore, to put ourselves in the place of the people who lived in Conques in the ninth or eleventh centuries.

The Middle Ages also were a time of harshness and deprivation, a time of sickness without remedies. Life was brutally short. Yet we may be sure that life meant as much to people in that time as it does to people in our time. It was hard to scratch a living from the land. And most people were bound to the land in serfdom. Even if they were free to leave the land where they worked, there were few and difficult roads. Only

the monasteries offered a measure of food and shelter. They were indispensable establishments. Such as they were, they were the hotels and hospitals of their time. Within the limits of charity and rudimentary medical knowledge, they provided greatly needed help.

Fortunately many of the monastic houses were very beautiful places that provided spiritual sustenance. They were beacons of light for medieval people. Ironically, they offered far more in the way of genuine care than modern Western societies provide to the indigent traveler or urban homeless. What the monasteries provided was not conditioned by market forces.

Another difficulty in comparing most modern Western societies with the Middle Ages is that equality is the paramount value today. Understanding the medieval mind lies in grasping the centrality of hierarchy and obedience. Equality is interpreted to mean that no group can give orders to another. The medieval world was completely hierarchical, starting with God the Father and going down to the secular and clerical authorities who could and did require strict obedience. Of course, it was a different kind of obedience from that known in modern times. It was based on love and trust and divine authority, not raw power.

Resistance to the concepts of hierarchy and obedience mushroomed in Western Europe and North America in the twentieth century. In the Middle Ages, every aspect of life was hierarchical. The feudal system

established on the wreck of the old Roman order was a system of detailed obligations which extended from king to serf. The idea and rightness of hierarchy was ingrained in the minds of the people. That concept and feeling is completely absent from the modern world. Largely gone from the modern mindset is the notion of obligations of one person to another. Moderns are imbued with the idea of individualism, of one person being a completely independent unit.

The medieval world also was a world of corporate life and action. The Protestant approach to religion, an individualistic approach to God and Christian duty, was unknown. People worshiped corporately and in places such as abbeys that were corporate institutions. Only in the modern Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and traditional Anglican communities does the idea and practice of corporate religious activity still survive.

This does not mean that in such communities the self is submerged in collectivity (as the Communists sought in their establishments). Rather, there is a richer appreciation of the individual. As Dr. Grace Goodell has noted, "Mysticism is an individual experience, and the Medieval idea of soul emphasizes individual responsibilities."

Largely vanished from the modern world is the concept of the unity of the faithful. In the ancient churches of Western Europe we see the structures and symbols of the most admirable unity of faith, which

produce the strongest personal bonds in communities and families, indeed nations. In short, much that was central to Western civilization has been destroyed by the disruptive processes of time. In the modern world, therefore, Christ's injunction to a Christian to love thy neighbor is hard to maintain as an operative force in the life of a person, family, or community.

The abbey of Conques and all the ancient churches are full of the symbolism of the unity of the human family under God. Men and women in the Middle Ages were far more alive to symbolism than the most sensitive moderns. For one thing, all the major physical structures, churches and monasteries, were conceived and built in symbolic terms. Every structural detail, from the arch to the spire, had a role in conveying a symbolic message.

Churches often were erected on sites that had been important to earlier pagan people. The church was intended to erase or supplant any remaining pagan significance.

Moderns, at least the religious among them, undoubtedly value and love their churches. Many of their associations are rooted in their churches. But given the varied nature of contemporary life, it is not always the case that a church is the absolute center of parishioners' lives, the source of community meaning.

The secular world is full of structures designed to focus attention on secular institutions, causes, and beliefs. Certainly, this was not the case in the medieval period. There were

castles and palaces, but these were not present in every locality. But the church was everywhere, and monasteries were numerous. At the time of the Reformation, when London had 30,000 residents, there were 100 churches in the city. A parish church might have had room to worship for a family, its household, and a small number of friends.

The extent of monastic life can be guessed by the fact that when Henry VIII struck out at monasticism, he abolished 800 monastic institutions in his kingdom. Or consider that Cluniacs had perhaps 600 houses when the order was at its height.

The church and its symbolism were similar throughout the West and so impressed the same message on worshipers, who constituted the entire population in every community, big or small. The unity of observance and faith was total. Today, the mind is pulled in many directions and shaped by an enormous variety of diverse forces. These forces didn't exist in the Middle Ages when life moved in a single stream and everything had sacramental significance.

Georges Dubuy, a member of the French Academy, wrote in 1994, in a paper published by the abbey, that "medieval man could not imagine a barrier between the visible universe and the next world." He noted that the abbey—and other churches—was conceived as a place where God and man could meet. This understanding has disappeared from the minds of most moderns; even people who are religious may have lost

this medieval conception, which shows the extent to which people in modern times have had a sense of sacramentalism removed from their consciousness. To bring back the fervor of Christians in the Middle Ages it would be necessary to regain the sacramental sense and understanding of the medieval mind. An aspect of the sculptured decoration of the abbey of Conques and other medieval churches is the depiction of the tortures of the damned. Moderns find it difficult to accept the imposition of everlasting punishments, including physical torture, on those who have committed terrible sins. To the medieval man or woman, it was perfectly conceivable that evil tongues would be torn out or the sluggish be forced to sit in flames for eternity. Moderns find such notions incompatible with a just and loving God. To be sure, there is no lack of unspeakable human activity such as the torture and other atrocities associated with the Communist and Nazi regimes of the twentieth century, cruelties imposed on millions of innocent people. Exactly what punishments perpetrators of such crimes will receive is not clear. But the modern imagination certainly is a world away from what our ancestors in Western Europe conceived a thousand years ago.

The people of the eleventh century lived in an age when cruel punishment was a part of daily life, not simply a feature of a terrible period of persecution. These punishments had come down from the old Roman order when the elites of Roman so-

ciety were familiar with philosophy but also accepted a terrible brutality. We cannot understand how a Marcus Aurelius could have written of the most civilized behavior and at the same time permitted people to be crushed by red hot iron plates. The people of the Middle Ages also lived with such incompatible elements in human life, incompatible with the loving kindness of Jesus Christ.

The spirituality represented by the Abbey of Conques and all the other churches and monasteries in the West was an extraordinary phase in human history. This phase came to an end with the fragmentation of Christian unity and the breakup of the order built on it. When we study a structure such as the abbey at Conques and gain an understanding of its organization and the larger organization of which it was a part, we surely also come to understand what has been subtracted from our civilization and its spiritual life as a result of the fragmentation and breakup. To a very large extent, we have lost the sacramental view of life which was the heart and soul of the medieval world. The cost is beyond any reckoning. The medieval sacramental character was a priceless possession.

It would be too much to expect that the mindset of Westerners in the twenty-first century could be reconstituted in the mold of the Middle Ages. History has moved on, providing a vast range of new experiences and establishing new thought processes, both good and bad. And as

history unfolds in this and later centuries, new and unexpected changes will take place. This is the way that it has always been. But this does not mean that all the ways and lessons of the past have to be discarded.

The Western world today incorporates institutions and insights rooted in biblical times and in the centuries we regard as the Classical World, the world of Greece and Rome. To a very large extent, what we regard as civilized is inherited from the past.

The current decline of Western civilization results in large part from the discounting of our inheritance. The same is true of our religious life. The discounting of our religious inheritance, beliefs and rites, is the hallmark of the emergence of an

anti-civilization. Fortunately, we have the capacity to recover a good measure of the qualities of the medieval mind. We can't live life as it was lived in the eleventh century—and we wouldn't want to do so—but we can seek to recover the best of the mindset that existed at that time and endeavor to make it operative within the new conditions of the twenty-first century, thereby strengthening the faith and religious observances of today. Indeed, for Christians this should be the challenge of our times: recovery of the sacramentalism that flourished in the medieval period and gave Christianity a shining quality. Without that ancient sense of the sacramental, we are fated to lead a debilitated and religiously much diminished existence.