

# *The Impulse of Power*

**Books by Michael W. Kelley**

*On Stone or Sand, the Ethics of Christianity, Capitalism & Socialism*, ISBN 0-9636834-0-3

*The Burden of God: Studies in Wisdom and Civilization from the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ISBN 0-9637768-0-0

*The Impulse of Power:  
Formative Ideals of  
Western Civilization*

Michael W. Kelley

Contra Mundum Books  
Minneapolis

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Published by:  
Contra Mundum Books  
PO Box 32652  
Spring Lake Park MN 55432-0652

Set in Galliard, 10 points  
Manufactured in the United States of America

ISBN 0-9637768-1-9

*For:*  
*Benjamin & Gretchen*

“...understanding as an engagement is an exertion; it is the resolve to inhabit an ever more intelligible, or an ever less mysterious world.”

“To recall is not merely to lay side by side in present consciousness rigid particles of past events, it is to organize our present consciousness, it is to think, to judge, to construct.”

– Michael Oakeshott –

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

– 2 Corinthians 10:5 –



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## *Preface*

*We cannot combat the errors of our time if we cannot recognize kindred errors in the past.... In every era, the modernisms of the day have reshaped men's views of the Bible when in fact the Bible requires us to reshape our world, our times, and ourselves in terms of the word of God.*

*—R.J. Rushdoony*

In his thought-provoking book, *Christ the Meaning of History*, Hendrikus Berkhof remarked: “History is the study of man’s actions and decisions. It is the terrain on which man’s cultural mission is realized; along with this it is also the terrain of his self-realization.” (p. 17)

As the title indicates, Berkhof thinks it necessary to evaluate the “terrain of man’s cultural mission” in terms of Christ. Is this conceivable? What can Christ possibly have to do with man’s “cultural mission?” In our modern, secular age this scarcely seems plausible. For some time now mankind has been busy fashioning culture without the least reference to Christ. We could even say that, at the present, mankind shows a decided aversion to Christ, and not least in his cultural efforts. For most people, Christ means religion, and they dismiss religion as irrelevant to man’s life, his culture especially. Perhaps, we should qualify this. Most people object to any religion that presents the demands of Christ, but not to a religion where their own interests receive top priority. Thus, in claiming that religion is irrelevant for culture, they do not mean *all* religion, only the Christian religion.

Berkhof’s assertion that Christ is the meaning of history might not make much of an impact on the thinking of the secular men of today – the elites who control the agenda of the institutions in which culture is discussed and fostered most especially

– but what effect does this thought have on those who call themselves *Christians*? Do Christians even imagine that there is any connection between Christ and history? Mind, we are not asking what role Christ played *in* history, as if our concern were merely with the person of Jesus and his effect on the people of his day two thousand years ago. Nor are we asking what impact the Christian religion has made on human history in the two thousand years of its existence, although this is not irrelevant. That Jesus had a following in history, that he engaged the devotion and beliefs of many throughout these two millennia is not in question. Rather, what we are asking, as does Berkhof, is what is the meaning of Christ *for* history – history being the terrain of man’s “cultural mission?” Does Christ have any meaning for the unfolding of man’s cultural mission? If so, do we have an obligation to evaluate man’s cultural mission in terms of Christ who is its meaning? Most especially, how do we understand Western culture in the light of Christ, since Western culture is hardly thinkable without considering that Christianity was essential to its formation and development?

Many, if not most, Christians do not even consider that man has been given a cultural mission. Or if, perhaps, man does have such a task to perform, they can scarcely imagine that God had anything to do with it. For most Christians there is little, if any, connection between what they profess to believe and the need to work out their faith in cultural form. In one sense this is understandable, since central to the Christian religion, as Scripture indicates, is its concern for the redemption of man from sin. The chief intent of God’s revelation in Christ would seem to have no other interest, so far as man is concerned, than this. But is this true? Does the sin of man have no impact on culture? And is the redemption of man from sin not intended to have an impact on his culture as well? Can we assume that man’s cultural labors are neutral so far as sin and righteousness are concerned? If not, then what bearing does Christ have on man’s cultural mission? Does not redemption in Christ also possess a relevance for the cultural labors of man?

History, indeed, is the terrain of man’s cultural mission. If

Christ is the meaning of history, then he is the key to the evaluation of man's cultural mission. As Christians, therefore, we are compelled to scrutinize the cultural labors of man from the standpoint of Christ who must have the central significance in all the work that man does under the sun. Our concern in what follows is to offer an evaluation of Western culture, for, as we mentioned, that is the cultural context in which Christianity has had the greatest impact. Has the Christianity embodied in that culture upheld the claims of Christ as it should have, or have other motives been at work, motives which have sought to drive Christ from the lordship of man's cultural mission? Have Christians been faithful in struggling on Christ's behalf against the intrusion of those other influences? If those other, non-Christian, ideals have gained ascendancy, what has been their effect on Western culture? We cannot answer these questions unless we examine the legacy of Western cultural ideals in detail. Only then will it be possible to see if Christ has truly been at the center of that civilization.

For many Christians these questions and concerns will likely seem irrelevant. With the arrival of the year 2000, there is perhaps little interest in looking into the past. Rather, all eyes are turned upon the immediate future when many Christians fervently expect Christ will come and finally set up his promised millennial kingdom. History, the past, the record of man's cultural mission, are of little concern. At the very least, their perspective on Christianity is one that is shaped by a need to save *souls* and a *go-to-heaven* theology. Nothing else, they suppose, really matters. Thus, when it comes to man's cultural mission, most do not see the church's missionary task to have any bearing upon it.

Everything depends, however, on what we understand by the word *Christ*. Is it merely a name, or is it a title? If it is the latter, what does it say about him who is the bearer of it? The Christian faith is *Christian*, after all, because it derives from Christ, not just Jesus. Consequently, all that pertains to the Christian faith has Christ, and all that that title means, at its center. We as Christians ought not simply to confess Jesus Christ,

but that Jesus *is* the Christ, the one anointed to be the heir of all creation. *Christ* bespeaks not simply the person of Jesus, but his kingdom and lordship of the whole earth as well. It is the term that designates his replacement of Adam as the head of the human race. All that God determined for mankind at creation now has its redemptive ground and purpose in him. Nothing summarizes better the meaning of the word *Christ* than these words of the apostle Paul to the Colossian Christians: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." (1:15–18) Not only is Christ the meaning of history, but nothing and no one else possibly can be. And if of history, then he is the meaning of man's cultural mission as well.

Paul's words strongly suggest that Christ is now as he describes and will not merely become so in the future. After all, he wrote these words nearly two millennia ago. If they were true then, they have remained true, and continue to be true today. Since Christ is at the same time the "firstborn over all creation," and the "firstborn from among the dead," then all that pertains to creation, man's cultural mission included, must have both its foundation and redemption in him. Consequently, as Christians, we must evaluate the work of man in the light of Christ who now has the *supremacy* over all things. Nothing that is part of man's life in this world is outside of Christ. But we shall return to this thought in the conclusion.

The end of the second millennium is a good time to look back on our cultural heritage and take stock. What value has Christ had within that culture? How do we assess man's activity in terms of Christ as the Lord of history, the Lord of man's cultural mission? This is what we propose to do in the following pages. We will not cover everything. We shall merely highlight those areas of Western culture which have stood out prominently in the ideals of the makers and producers of that culture. That is,

we shall but touch upon those various domains which have received such great emphasis in the studies done on Western man. Some may find this not to be worthwhile or, at the least, tedious and not immediately practical. But, apart from the intrinsic need to appraise all that men do in terms of Christ who will one day bring all the works of man into judgment, so long as history continues, we, as Christians especially, must seek to understand what is involved in the phrase, Christ the meaning of history.



*Part I • Ancient Man*  
*“The First Enlightenment”*





## 1 • Homer

### *The Heroic Ideal*

The name *Western Civilization* is more than a term of geography. It refers to a cultural idea – a total civilizational project by which a portion of mankind endeavored over the course of centuries to construct a viable philosophy of life and existence, and thereby gradually to propound a suitable concept of rational, social and ethical order. It was *Western* because of where it sprang up and the nations which first embraced its ideals, but it was not a vision of life and reality that was territorially limited. In time it came to be regarded, at least by those within it, as the best that men anywhere were capable of achieving. Western civilization offered man an ordered concept of life that uniquely enabled him to realize his greatest potential and so give the highest positive significance to his essential humanity. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Western civilization has gained such a commanding influence throughout the world and achieved so widespread a benefit for larger numbers of people everywhere.

By contrast, in nearly all non-Western civilizations, past and present, the principal feature has been, and remains, that they are cultures designed for, and limited in their usefulness to, ruling elites. By-and-large a powerful few chart the course and enjoy the benefits of culture and civilization, and nearly always at the expense of the weak and passive many. In these cultures knowledge, that essential stock of a civilization's ideas about itself and the world, has been controlled by, and restricted to, an *aristocratic* cadre who view it as a way to promote themselves and dominate others. Often their goal has been to preserve the people's ignorance and subordination by the superstitions of *noble* character and superiority of inherited virtue of the rulers. Such civilizations necessarily insist upon a sharp distinction between the special few who have access to the *gods* and the unenlightened many who must submit to the superior wisdom

and understanding of the privileged. This cultural mentality maintains the fiction that only these specially high-bred persons are fully human for the reason that they are by nature and education more god-like in their capacities and abilities. Cultures like these are, and always have been, stagnant and moribund, neither developing nor progressing in any beneficial way for the people as a whole. The elites who dominate them have a strong interest in maintaining the status quo. With their superiority in the social scheme, being, in their minds, a necessity of nature and not merely the flattery of custom, naturally, they would stoutly resist all forms of change, regardless of whether or not it improves the moral and material condition of their alleged inferiors. Cultures and civilizations like these, being tightly dominated from the top, tend to languish under the oppressive weight of semi-barbaric conditions, regardless of how stable or appealing they may appear to the outside observer. They constrict the human spirit and prevent man's natural talents and interests from being fully realized.

Compared to these non-Western cultural traits, Western civilization came eventually to embody the belief that no men are innately superior to others. Though some possess outstanding abilities and talents and may, for that reason, contribute more to the cultural edifice, this does not make them inherently more human, nor are other, less gifted, persons incapable of appropriating the culture or of contributing to its progressive unfolding in history. This, in no small measure, is attributable to the influence of Christianity which saw in man a miniature reflection of his Maker and therefore a creature upon whom his Creator possessed a preeminent claim. It was man's duty to develop his inner nature including his talents and abilities so as to mirror the God who gave him life and all things besides. Under God all men stood on an equal footing regardless of their place in society. This encouraged a respect for human life and accomplishment on a broad scale, and helped to reduce the deep impress of elitist superiority and aristocratic self-exaltation. Its effect was to open up culture to a wider participation than just for those who occupied the top rung of the social and moral ladder.

What is more, only in the West did the notion of history, as the record of a civilization's advance or regression, self-consciously shape the way a people viewed itself and its accomplishments. Western man, for the most part, has not thought of his culture as a finished product, but as an on-going enterprise in which present achievements, although built on the accumulated deeds of past generations, furnish but the opportunities for greater benefits for tomorrow. Western culture was no static ideal, but a dynamic and growing vision for future generations. In this sense, Western culture is still an ideal to be achieved, still in process of formation.

However, as we arrive at the end of the twentieth century, thoughtful persons everywhere generally acknowledge that Western civilization appears to be mired in a profound crisis of identity. The cherished belief that Western culture stands superior to other forms of culture has come under sustained and venomous attack. Its fortress walls are crumbling under intensifying assaults, and, most seriously, not so much from those on the outside as from those within! Faith in Western culture has been eroded in the minds of the offspring whose ancestors were its builders. Those who lead this attack have in mind not amendment but replacement; often theirs is a simplistic belief that *somehow* out of the whirlwind of destruction something better will arise. Yet it is noteworthy that what appears to be the emerging alternative looks suspiciously like all non-Western types of cultures with which history and the present are replete. Elitism in the name of Man is once again making a vicious bid for control of the cultural agenda, not to advance a new principle of civilization, but in a sheer drive for power in order to compel the multitudes to submit to the orders of the few who, self-assertedly, are possessed of superior moral vision and understanding.

Has Nietzsche triumphed? Has the "will to power" replaced belief in principled order and civility? These questions elicit others that require reflection. Has Western civilization ever been devoid of elitist notions of its own? Has it been entirely free from the types of attitudes that have found expression throughout history in all non-Western cultures and civilizations?

There is in man a strong sense that life means more than mere animal existence; that man ought to shape and develop his life so as to achieve an enduring quality, one that should result from systematic and thoughtful effort. In the Biblical view, man was created by God to “have dominion” over the earth and to serve his Creator by building a kingdom that would come to expression as a culture and civilization. By erecting civilization man would build himself up and bring to its fullest realization the very essence of his manhood under God. By doing so, he would accomplish God’s purpose for himself and, at the same time, honor and glorify the God Who gave him life and culture and every good thing in the first place.

Into this depiction of man’s purpose in God’s world a deep shade intrudes. If Scripture speaks of man being given a cultural task to perform, it also asserts that man was created to be God’s obedient servant, that he was to go about his civilizational labors in *ethical* submission to God’s will. Because man rebelled against this moral requirement, God cursed man with death and his cultural endeavors with vanity. By acting in ethical disobedience against God man forfeited all claims to whatever benefits God intended that man should reap in kingdom service to Him.

God brought light to bear on this darkness by establishing a new foundation upon which men could hope once again to realize a kingdom purpose. He would provide *salvation* for man from his moral corruption and disobedience and thereby grant the basis of a new effort at a complete culture and civilization. At the same time, it was made clear that morality and culture were inextricably intertwined, that the former would always be the basis of the latter. God created man for a kingdom purpose, and man will be bound by this fact. Man in rebellion insists that, rather than God’s will standing at the ethical center of his cultural effort, it should be man’s moral self-interpretation that is to prevail. He will try to ignore or redefine God’s curse on his endeavors in order to explain it away. There lies at the heart of man’s effort at civilization a conflict between those who recognize the essential sinful nature of man as Biblically defined and those who do not, between those who recognize that only God’s

method of redemption can avail man and his culture, and those who persistently refuse to reckon with God and who reject his salvation plan in the vain belief that man can realize his own *salvation* project. This ethical division of mankind inevitably affects culture and civilization, for man cannot cease to be a kingdom creature.

Today Western culture stands perilously close to the brink of collapse. If we should wish to know the reasons, we shall have to reckon with the ethical-religious dichotomy that lies at the center of Western man's endeavor. Moreover, it has long been present at the core of Western culture. The terms which best describe these antithetical viewpoints have been and remain *Christianity* and *Humanism*. No others adequately explain the clash of viewpoints that lie at the root of Western civilization and can account for the strong polarity between what men today have come to value or detest in Western civilization.

### I> *The Roots of the West*

It is difficult to say exactly when Western culture and civilization began. Since the humanist side of Western culture long preceded the Christian side, scholars and students of Western culture in recent centuries, especially in the nineteenth century, have not hesitated to claim that Western civilization began with the Greeks. Their reasons may vary: some are led by a desire to justify an anti-Christian *enlightenment* faith in man and human progress initially unfolded in Greek ideas; others by a romantic longing for a cultural past unaffected by modern industrialism and impersonal mass society. But recently open fissures have appeared in Humanism. For the past three centuries Humanism has been successful in eclipsing the Christian dimension of Western culture. But while still very much in control, Humanism is now in process of breaking into opposing and irreconcilable points of view. Rather than constituting a unified agenda, Humanism has degenerated into an internecine struggle which in the twentieth century, beginning first in Europe – the geo-

graphical center of the West – but expanding into every region of the globe, has led to wars, revolutions, and brutalities on a scale not seen before in history. The very idea of Western civilization has been called into question, for many have come to believe that the cherished ideals of Western culture, far from acting as a barrier against these devastating upheavals, are chiefly responsible for them. As a result, humanist elites, who took charge of culture in order to expel Christianity and substitute a totally humanist concept of order, have themselves lost faith in their own agenda. In fact, they can no longer even define what that agenda is. A fierce dispute has arisen between the older traditionalists who believe in the goodness of Western culture and the newer multiculturalists who revile it as evil and oppressive. While the former seek to rejuvenate its core beliefs, the latter wish only to destroy it. For this reason, those who pay homage to the story of the West have made an effort to recall and reestablish the core ideals of Western civilization and to recapture the essential vision of order as first conceived and advanced in the classical Greek world of thought. If Western civilization is to rediscover its pristine values, it is alleged, we must return to the fountainhead in ancient Greece. We can no longer merely attempt to patch up the cracks, we must clear away the rubble down to the groundwork and begin anew. There in the Greek mind we shall discover the solid foundations upon which the architectural upper stories of Western culture and civilization had once been and may again be laboriously and painstakingly constructed.

Those who espouse this rediscovery of classicism are mainly the more *conservative* among humanists who still retain respect and adherence for Christianity in a cultural sense. However, they are not alone in defending this classical revival; they are joined by many Christians as well. Both are concerned to reconstruct a classical model in education, since this has been the area of culture in which the breakdown of Humanism has appeared to be the most devastating and the anti-Western onslaught has made its greatest gains. Christians, especially, fondly recall those medieval centuries when *Christianity* dominated the cultural agenda and when, as they read history, *faith*

and *reason* were willing and congenial partners in a common enterprise. They point to this era as a time when order prevailed and God and Church combined to hold in check the degenerative impulses of man's irrational and *sinful* tendencies. Cultural order was viewed as divinely inspired, and while men might still act here and there with a crude lawlessness, nevertheless a general conception of good and evil predominated to hold down man's barbarous cupidity and bridle his passions so as to prevent an overthrow of civilization. Christianity was not a needless impediment, still less an affront, to civilization, as it has come to be viewed by most contemporary humanists, but a necessary moral barrier to the innate savagery and capriciousness of men for whom conquest, plunder, and ruinous blood-letting would otherwise comprise the means to attain their goals of temporal advantage. Conservative humanists, on the other hand, wish to return to the models of ancient Greece only to re-discover the basic ideas which gave birth to the modern Enlightenment when, as they see it, men organized their world on the principles of unbiased reason and natural law, and science, democracy, and economic rationality were the result. Culture and civilization which sprang therefrom, having lost their appeal in recent times, must be revived. Christianity may help in so far as it encourages those ideals thought by some humanists to be necessary to the revival of rational civilization: open intellectual and scientific procedures and methods, suppression of fanatical tendencies, and the fostering of manners and tastes considered to be inseparable from civilized behavior and discourse, i.e., the code of the gentleman.

The problem with this more conservative brand of thinking, especially in Christian circles, is its failure to understand that while Christianity may have in the past acquired a tenuous dominance in questions of ethical behavior it was scarcely tied to a uniquely Biblical cultural agenda. In fact, Christians imbibed many of their ideas of culture and civilization from the classical thinking of Greece and Rome. Thus, the idea of culture proved to be a hybrid of Christianity with Humanism. Christianity was viewed as merely supplying what was lacking in the humanist

outlook, namely, a vision of the true God and faith in His salvation. Salvation in this conception, however, was reduced to one of escape, an effective denial of a total kingdom ideal. Men were not taught that Scripture provides a cultural agenda of its own and, if men are again to live properly in terms of God's *dominion* purpose for man, they must learn it uncontaminated from that source. Many at that time could not see that ancient classical thought was a product of man's *covenant* rebellion and served to further a total anti-God program for man. As a result, genuine Biblical Christianity was compromised and could not sustain its dominance in the West once men, attracted to Humanism, gradually became aware that they could fashion the cultural agenda on entirely Humanist grounds and declined to submit to what, to them, was an alien and culturally irrelevant ethico-religious mind-set.

Today the confident faith of Humanism can be seen to be a transparent delusion. Humanism's control of the cultural agenda is proving the death of culture and civilization. Western Man is morally rudderless on a vast ocean that is being swept by fierce gales, and the leaky vessel that constitutes his civilization shows alarming signs of breaking apart. All the while a struggle is being waged between the occupants over who is best fitted to pilot the ship as well as where it should sail for the good of all. Should they be heeded who suggest that the ideals of classical man need to be recovered in order to revive the lost vision of culture that made the West what it is in the first place? Should we accept the argument of those who wish to restore the displaced ideals represented by the medieval synthesis of Christianity and Humanism? Can such salvage operations succeed? Is it possible to remake Western civilization on the same basis from which it first sprang up? If so, why should one accept that it will turn out better the second time?

It is essential to re-think the entire project of Western civilization, not because Western culture is irretrievably lost and ought to be replaced by something else. Man cannot simply invent cultures and civilizations at his will, for these unfold as products of history which, in the final analysis, is sovereignly



determined by God. However, man is responsible for his use of the materials given him to shape into culture and for the choice of the proper ideals which should guide his endeavor. How has Western man developed culture? Upon what standard has he sought to erect it? There are but two options available: that which comes from God in His revealed Word, or that which arises from man's sin-darkened imagination. No mixture or confusion is possible at any time. All man's attempts at synthesis have inevitably led him to reject the *former* for the exclusive sake of the *latter*. At the outset, these were, we readily admit, the ideals of ancient Greek thinkers. Thus, in order to re-examine the main ideals which have contributed to make Western culture what it is and have helped to contribute to its present state of decline, it is necessary to start with the Greeks.

## 2> *The Legacy of Greece*

In the world of scholarship that has, since the Renaissance certainly but more especially in the past two centuries, turned to a study of Greek culture and civilization in search of the roots of our own past and culture, it has become commonplace to speak of something called "the distinctive character of the Greek mind..."<sup>1</sup> In other words, at any moment in the Greek past we shall be presented with a common set of assumptions about life, the world and what constitutes man's place in it that formed the basis upon which a unique people passed from the stage of migratory primitiveness to a settled and permanent way of living. It was "Greek" because it differed from other cultural ideals, and it was "mind" because it resulted from reflective self-consciousness. The Greeks, allegedly, were the first to think of culture and civilization as a product of thought, more than mere accident, the result of rational inventiveness. The Greeks, we are told, came to see themselves as possessing the capacity to make culture

1. W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. xii.

after the pattern of ideas – ideas which, because they supposedly represented the nature of things, possessed immutability and authority. This capacity for mental self-reflection, it is argued, has enabled the Greeks to become the founders of European, or Western, civilization. Bruno Snell, for example, averred that “European thinking begins with the Greeks. They have made it what it is: our only way of thinking; its authority, in the Western world, is undisputed...we use this thought...to focus upon... truth...with its help we hope to grasp the unchanging principles of this life.”<sup>2</sup>

It is doubtless true that Greek ideals appear to us as a self-conscious cultural and civilizational identity. In general and throughout Greek history we can recognize a common society which shares the same values and outlook on life. This Greek cultural self-recognition and adherence reached its highest articulation with the formation of philosophy. Consequently, when we think of Greek ideals, we think of Plato and Aristotle. There were others, but these two men far exceed them in notoriety and influence. If philosophy forms the pinnacle of Greek cultural self-reflection, then Plato and Aristotle are the principal minds in the formation of philosophy. Other thinkers are always judged by the canons of thought defined by these two surpassing geniuses.

The reason for the ascendancy of philosophy in the world of Greek ideals can be found in the chief characteristic of Greek philosophy, the belief that a true social and civilizational order was conceivable as a “scientific” validity for all men.<sup>3</sup> Man could construct a total culture that reflected a rationality inherent in his mind. The Greek mind believed passionately in man’s inborn capacity to comprehend the total nature of reality, including both its form and the processes which animate it. Such a comprehensive understanding of reality was necessary in order to express fully the total life of man within the framework of that reality, to shape life in accordance with an ordered civilizational

2. Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1982), p. vi.
3. Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis: Order and History*, vol. II, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), p. 28.

program. It was in the development of philosophy that this Greek faith in the ability of the mind of man to attain to such a “comprehensive understanding” had reached its greatest intellectual focus. In Western civilization to this day the belief in a totally scientifically constructed culture and society has remained a cardinal article of faith.

Still, though it is easily arguable that Greek ideals acquired their most systematically intelligible conceptual and verbal form with the arrival of philosophy, it is far from true that those ideals were without expression outside philosophy proper. They are to be found in poetry, drama, sculpture and architecture as well. Any form in which Greek thought could take shape in verbal or visual composition can be seen as an apt vehicle for Greek ideals. Each area contributed in its own way to sustain the Greek vision of life. Each cultural feature sprang from generally accepted values and served to further a total common agenda. In every sense the Greek mind sought to give expression to a uniquely Greek civilizational and cultural ideal. It is in this notion of a total “*paideia*” that the Greeks, as Werner Jaeger characterized it, “constitute a fundamental advance on the great peoples of the Orient, a new stage in the development of society.”<sup>4</sup> By this he meant that the Greeks, in distinction from ancient Babylon or Egypt, viewed culture as the product of a deliberate effort by man himself rather than as a creation of the gods that required of man unquestioned acceptance and submission. Here we arrive at the religious and ethical center of Greek ideals which have meant so much to Western thinkers, namely, the emergence of an autonomous man, freed from superstition and in charge of his own destiny. It is a vision of man who seeks to know the reason of things and from whom irrational forces and powers, dark designs of nature and abstract and inaccessible deities slowly recede driven away by the light of human self-purpose and creative energies. For the Greeks culture and civilization are not things to be taken

4. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. I, trans. by Gilbert Highet, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. xiv.

on authority, but should be the end-results of consciously applied human thought-process. Only then, they assumed, can man be confident they belong to him and lift his essential humanity above a fawning servility and degrading self-abasement, elevate him, indeed, to the level of deity itself!

The essence, then, of what we take to be "the Greek legacy" is to be found in this man-centered and man-originated cultural ideal. This central *religious* starting-point is the connecting link between every expression of Greek culture. In epic or lyric poetry, tragic or comic drama, with philosophers from the Presocratics to Plotinus, or with the building of cities, their art and temples, we are confronted with man's endeavor to define himself and his world by drawing from the depths of his own psychological resources. While the outward appearance in each of these aspects of their culture seem to suggest that the Greeks were merely indulging a natural human propensity to understand the nature of reality or to find pleasure in artistic creation, in fact, they were passionately motivated by an intense desire to articulate the meaning of man and to justify his existence, bounded as it is by finiteness and death, in a world in which human life is a struggle against an inscrutable and ultimately inexplicable Fate. To them it seemed that precisely because he must live his life against the background of an ultimate Fate, man alone can and must provide a definition of himself and his endeavors, for no other source of purpose and meaning was available but what he himself, out of his own inner resources, determined upon. The Greeks did not accept that man was created by a supernatural Being or God and thus derived the justification of his existence from the Deity. Consequently, man was left to himself, and the Greeks were confident that they had discovered the true ideal of man.

Now the knowledgeable student of Greek history and literature will at this point, no doubt, voice an objection. He will, understandably, insist that the ancient Greeks were, like their neighbors to the East, deeply attached to a whole world of gods and goddesses, and that Greeks everywhere, in the clear record of their architectural remains (temples, statues, pottery), demon-

strated a willing and eager devotion to divinities whose control of their lives and livelihoods seemed not to have the slightest connection whatever to anything rational. He will detect in the darker recesses of the Greek consciousness a superstitious attachment to *chthonic* powers whose presence they imagined to lie hidden in every occurrence of nature and whose appeasement was required in order to insure the regular prosperity of crops, herds and flocks. For many Greeks, ignorant of the forces and laws of nature as understood by modern science, their experience seemed to be actuated by mysterious spiritual beings to whom man must give due satisfaction if he hoped to gain the favor of their power and beneficence. How, it will be asked, can it be said that the Greeks felt any sense of freedom and self-determination as against the necessity to grovel before what we clearly know was nothing more than credulous superstitions and primitive fantasies?

One need not suppose that such an objection is misplaced. We do not suggest that Greek ideals "sprang full blown from the head of Zeus," that is, were always present in mature form. Nor do we claim that certain Greeks, whose endeavor to shape the ideals in a self-conscious manner, did not have to strive against the popular religious assumptions of the people in general. Indeed, the Greeks were a deeply religious people and were as full of error in the object and content of their religious expression as were any peoples in the ancient world. Nevertheless, the Greeks were most deeply concerned to make even this most vulnerable area of their outlook as subject to a total cultural vision as possible; the place of the gods was recognized, but man was elevated along side them. That is why the Greek mind invented the Olympian religion. It was developed precisely in order to bring man's encounter with the greater powers of life and nature into a framework of rational order and so to justify man's place in the scheme of things. Fate might continue to have the ultimate say, but man need not feel that his own limited existence was any the less important for the fact that he must die than that of the gods who knew not death and who presumably treated man, as in the East, as a mere object of utter indifference or con-

descending arbitrariness. For the Olympian gods were conceived to be in need of man as much as man was dependent upon them. The Greek ideal of culture was to bring the gods and men into closer relationship in order ultimately to bring about a merging of the two.

The Greek mind is marked by the search for total cosmic order. Such a vision of order was necessary to the Greek conception of culture and civilization, for they did not imagine, as does our modern age, that human life could make sense against the background of an ultimately random meaninglessness. At the same time, the Greeks were not satisfied merely to assume the existence of order; theirs was a passionate desire to comprehend it conceptually, and thereby to bring it within the grip of man's intellectual control. To do so meant to set man himself at the center of that cosmic order, as the one for whom, in the last analysis, that order existed.

In two significant ways the Greek mind contrasted with modern views. First, the Greeks had a deep fear of chaos, of a surrounding nature that was threatening and out of control. Unlike modern men who view chaos as a *generative* power in and of itself, the Greeks saw chaos only as *de-generative* and destructive. Second, while the Greeks sought to achieve a rational comprehension of order, the causes and nature of order were not, as with modern thinkers, an absolute creation of human reason. Order was largely a given, a product of forces and factors outside complete human control. Man, for the Greeks, was dependent upon an order not altogether of his own making. The Greeks, initially at least, did not think of the nature of order as impersonal, but as personal, a work of the gods, who were not conceived as the creators of order, but merely regarded as necessary to its continued existence. The gods did not stand above, but belonged with men within the same cosmic order, within the same conception of culture and civilization. Resort to the gods was necessary where man felt himself not totally capable of thinking and acting on his own. Moreover, even the gods were not entirely above the threat of chaos, for they, too, exhibited dark passions which often set one against another in a contest of wills.

It must have reminded the Greeks how fragile was the nature of the order that they so desperately hoped would serve the interests of man.

Greek ideals, like others that appear in human history, follow the pattern of historical emergence, maturation, and decay. They do not simply unfold in accordance with a uniform principle of development. There is an inner struggle between different points of view for domination of the cultural heritage. Nevertheless, while there are significant discontinuities, it is possible to highlight the essential themes in their development in such a way as to disclose their interconnections. We begin with Homer and the Homeric contribution to Greek ideals. This is no arbitrary starting-point, but the one that was recognized by the Greeks themselves.

### 3> *Homer, the Theologian*

Homer, the name that stands for the author of those great works of epic poetry, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, is universally regarded as the founding-father of Greek cultural ideals. This was because Greek cultural ideals were, more than anything, the product of mind. To be Greek meant not so much to belong to a particular ethnic group as it did to be educated in terms of a given and rationally constructed set of ideas. A culture that views itself as the result of thought and learning necessarily places a great emphasis upon literary education as the chief means by which that culture is transmitted to its members. For Greeks, Homer was the basis of their literature and thus their education. This was not simply because Homer was the oldest extant literature in the Greek system of learning, but because the Homeric poems were the canon of orthodoxy for every learned Greek. H. I. Marrou observed: “[T]hroughout its history Greek literary education kept Homer as its basic text, the focus of all its studies.”<sup>5</sup> R.R.

5. H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. by George Lamb, (New York: A Mentor Book, 1964), p. 29.

Bolgar has asserted no less by averring that “throughout Greek history, but in particular during the golden age of Athens, they [the Homeric poems] played the same role as the Authorized Version later did in England.”<sup>6</sup> Quite simply, Homer was the *Bible* of Greek education. He provided the authoritative *word* for Greek culture as a whole, and not simply at the beginning or as one part of Greek ideals. “Homer dominated Greek education much more absolutely than Shakespeare did the English or Dante the Italians.”<sup>7</sup> Generations of cultivated Greeks could not imagine that one could be educated – could therefore even be Greek! – without a thorough grounding in Homer. Nor did they assume that Homer was useful simply for a period of formal studies, but they regarded him as a *living* word, to be continuously consulted and meditated upon. “There are many testimonies to the fact that every cultivated Greek had a copy of Homer’s works at his bedside....”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, for Greeks, Homer was no passing fancy, nor a dead intellectual past. He stood at the heart of what Greeks thought and believed. If Homer represented for Greeks the foundation of their thinking then he must constitute the starting-point in any study of their ideals.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Homer’s value in the Greek idea of education lay in the aesthetic quality of his poetic constructions. We moderns would place Homer in our category of *literature*. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* would interest us, then, principally as characteristic pieces of literary genius. We would examine them for their poetic form and artistic inventiveness. The elegant simplicity of verbal rhythm and cadence, the word-play, the metaphors and stylistic devices are the sorts of things that might occupy our attention. Otherwise, Homer is but one more example of primitive mythological story-telling.

However, if we are to understand the fundamental assumptions of Greek cultural and civilizational ideals, we must view Homer as “something much more than a figure in the

6. R.R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beginnings*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954), p. 17.

7. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, p. 29.

8. Marrou, p. 29.



parade of literary history.”<sup>9</sup> The long favor he enjoyed in the ancient classical world was far more than literary-aesthetic. Value inhered in content. “It was not primarily as a literary masterpiece,” comments Marrou, “that the epic was studied, but because its content was ethical, a treatise on the ideal.”<sup>10</sup> Homer’s importance to the Greeks lay in the fact that he was “the greatest creator and shaper of Greek life and Greek character.” It was an attempt by a man without the true knowledge of God to fashion a true explanation of man. In this respect, then, “The Homeric epics contain the germs of all Greek philosophy. In them we can clearly see the anthropocentric tendency of Greek thought, the tendency which contrasts so strongly with the theomorphic philosophy of the Oriental who sees God as the sole actor and man as merely the instrument or object of that divine activity.”<sup>11</sup> What Homer taught, not how he taught it, was the main concern of the Greeks.

Homer’s role as educator of the Greeks can be best described as that of *theologian*. Although Greek ideals were to possess an “anthropocentric tendency,” nevertheless, they emerged as the product of a theological point of view. Greeks, as was true of all men in ancient cultures, could not think of man without reference to the divine world. The modern mind condescendingly attributes this to ancient man’s primitive stage in the evolutionary process. Thus, it is said that “Homeric man has not yet awakened to the fact that he possesses in his own soul the source of his powers...he receives them as a natural and fitting donation from the gods.”<sup>12</sup> Modern enlightenment secularism asserts that “primitive man feels that he is bound to the gods; he has not yet aroused himself to an awareness of his own freedom.”<sup>13</sup> But, putting the matter this way distorts Homer’s thinking. While it is true that in the epic the actions of men are regularly mixed together with the actions of gods, it is not simply

9. Jaeger, *Paideia*, p. 36.

10. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, p. 30

11. Jaeger, pp. 36 & 53.

12. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, p. 21.

13. Snell, p. 31.

because Homer lacked what modern man thinks is the essence of man, namely, *freedom*. What ancient man sought – Homer and the Greeks especially – was an explanation of human existence that would elevate him to god-like status. Freedom, as an abstract quality, was not what mattered, but an ordered ideal of living that integrated man into the total cosmic harmony. Simply to get rid of the gods was inconceivable, but to imagine a world of gods and men arranged together in mutual dependence was of the utmost importance. And for the Greeks Homer is the one who, more than anyone else, satisfied this yearning.

While the gods figure prominently in Homer, the main emphasis in his poetry is on the actions of men. In this he (and the Greeks) differs from the theomorphic cultures to the East where the stories all speak of gods and almost nothing but gods. Homer is concerned to stress the importance of man in the scheme of things, but not *man-in-general*; Homer's world was filled with great men, with warriors and heroes. Homer was no egalitarian. Not the equality of man, but the glory of man was his chief interest. He lived in an aristocratic world, a world characterized by a king and his retinue. Naturally, his idea of man centered on the notion that some men are by nature and ability – not to mention social necessity – simply superior to other men. The primary feature of this world was not one of the mind and contemplation, but one of activity, and especially competitive activity. The ideal of man which Homer envisaged was achieved by prowess, courage, and physical triumph in combat or games. It was also a world run by a noble code of honor and self-glorification. Two aspects of this knightly ideal appear: the ideal man must be all-surpassing in the great contest of war, and he must also exhibit great qualities of strategy and oratory. He must possess the ability to inspire confidence in his fellow warriors with words and speech. Needless to say, it was a world for whom youth and vigor represented the best that life had to offer.

We should not imagine, however, that Homer's heroes simply conform to what in our understanding would be described as a romantic tale of adventure. Homer's heroes are not romantic figures on a chivalrous escapade. When Homer, in

the *Iliad* especially, chooses as his subject matter an episode of war he does so with the intention of placing man's life within a compelling context of agonizing suffering and cruel hardship that exposes him to the terrors of painful and violent death and dying. It is a depiction of the life of man against the background of total chaos and disorder in which the failure to honor men and gods is presented as the essential root of the problem in the cosmos. Here it might be added that it was principally the *Iliad* that attracted the ancient's attention to Homer, and not so much the *Odyssey*. For it was here that Homer's concern to define the problem of disorder – rather, to what extent order and disorder interpenetrated one another – a problem that so deeply disturbed the Greek mind in general, was to be expressed with such acute anxiety. What is the source of evil? Is evil more ultimate than the good? These are the underlying questions that Homer's heroes are keenly desirous of resolving.

In Homer, then, to discover the key to disorder is to find the solution to order. Perhaps the word "solution" is too strong a word, for any resolution to man's problem – indeed, to the basic disturbance in the cosmos – is not finally resolved in Homer. At best, Homer seeks for a *modus vivendi* for man in the midst of an existence that teeters on a precarious brink. For if honor and self-glory constitute the core ethical ideals of gods and men and are the only motives from which their actions can aspire to any productive significance, then gods and men alike will be quick to take offense whenever they feel the least bit slighted in such weighty matters. When that happens war and its attendant consequences are the inevitable result. Ironically, at the same time, Homer regards experience of the misery and cruelty of war as precisely necessary in order to offer the means by which heroic deeds can be given opportunity to triumph over the dissolving powers of chaos and disorder. The war is a metaphor for the life of man as a whole, for man's life is necessarily one of hardship, suffering, and all too quickly of old age and death. If man is to achieve lasting value for himself he must hero-like confront his experience and leave a name and example to follow. He must muster courage, strength, and fearless resolve and

not show weakness or timidity, which would be dishonorable and shameful cowardice. He must deny death its true meaning as the curse of God for sin and rebellion and view it with defiance and scorn.

From the theological point of view in Homer it is not a simple matter to say that order resides in the Olympian deities, and disorder in man. Both alike are faced with the dissolving factor of disorder and chaos. However, the greater power of the gods gives them a greater advantage in the maintenance of total order in the threatening face of cosmic disorder. Not being threatened by death or old age, they are less compelled to consider the problem than is man. It is this certainty of death that raises so intensely the problem of order for man. What purpose does life possess if it must end or man must experience during his brief existence such intensity of suffering and sorrow? Homer's solution to this problem is the *hero*. In the hero a more than ordinary human quality can be seen to emerge and provide a guidance and model in reaching for the sense of meaning to the life of man. As Voegelin comments, "[t]he hero in the Homeric sense can be defined as the man in whose actions a more-than-human order of being becomes manifest."<sup>14</sup> Man must learn to live in terms of an ideal of man that man must achieve for himself. The gods may assist, but they cannot replace the necessity of man to act on his own behalf.

#### 4• *A World Fit for Heroes*

For Homer, as for Greeks in general, disorder, suffering, and finally death were the fundamental problems confronting man in the cosmos. If man wishes to find the key to order he must seek for it in the causes of disorder. For Homer an explanation must be found that implicates man in the causes of disorder, but only in such a way that leaves man free of complete responsibility. Moreover, the causes of order must be such that man can

14. Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, p. 104.

be regarded as having the resources and ability, as much as any god, in its ultimate realization. Man must be seen as necessary to both the breakdown as well as the re-establishment of true order. In this way, man will be seen to be as essential to his own well-being in the cosmos as are the gods, for his creative powers and moral self-definition are as indispensable as theirs.

In Homer, the problem of disorder is defined on three levels: first, as it arises between men and gods; second, as it confronts man on the social level; and, last, as it originates between individuals. In the *Iliad* all three aspects of the problem appear. What is more, all of them are seen to be interrelated; the problem at one level gives rise to the problem on the other two levels. The war attests to the existence of the problem, for the war results from the breakdown of order. Had there been no disturbance in cosmic order, the war would not have arisen. However, what seems to concern Homer the most is that the war itself, the behavior it gives rise to, occasions the most serious dimension of the problem. For in the *Iliad*, as Havelock mentions, "a grand quarrel, a major feud... is to provide the controlling theme for his whole story..." It is Homer's purpose to speak of "a conflict between two men of power, in whose passions and decisions the fate of the whole group is involved.... Their acts and thoughts disturb the conduct and affect the fate of the society in which they move."<sup>15</sup> The *Iliad* is about the dissension between two heroes, their respective claims to the honor they believe is their due and the dishonor each has done to the other. This failure to give proper honor has led to disaster and is the cause for which they have gone to war, and the war which in turn was also a matter of honor, is imperiled with total loss. Unless the equal honor due to both can be properly restored disorder and destruction threatens to engulf the whole of society.

Here, Homer is able to say, is a human problem of divine proportions, but one in which the only solution available is somehow to be found in man alone. It is a story intended to

15. Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 65 & 66.

point a moral: a failure to give proper honor to man is as much at the root of man's problem as to dishonor the gods. Gods are not the only beings who have a claim to be honored. In Homer's mind, man has an equal claim. Man's esteem is thereby lifted to the level of divinity so far as any ethical scope of reality is concerned, for to dishonor men is of no less an offense than to dishonor gods. And if indignity to men is the moral equivalent of the indignity to gods then man is at least the ethical equal of the gods. Such a moral imperative is grounded in the fabric of existence which embraces both gods and men. Gods have no claim to either priority or superiority over men in ethical terms.

It has been necessary to emphasize this point as most of us have learned to think of the story of the *Iliad* as having simply to do with the fight for a woman, Helen, whom Paris, a prince of Troy, has *stolen* (with Helen's eager complicity) from her husband Menelaus, an Achæan noble. While this aspect of the story is alluded to in the *Iliad*, Homer's concern with this dimension of the problem is incidental. What is more, the alleged "trial of Paris," in which three goddesses, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, compel him to choose which of them is the most desirable, while also alluded to in the *Iliad*, is never actually mentioned. The principal issue of the epic is the clash of honor between Achilles and Agamemnon. Other incidents have importance only to the extent that they permit Homer to place what he believes is the central problem in a larger moral context.

However, in spite of not being mentioned, the "trial of Paris" does represent the transcending moral dilemma in which man symbolically appears in the background of the story as victim. In the trial Paris is confronted with a choice of goods. Each good is represented by a single divinity. Each particular good conformed to what in the mind of most men would be deemed a worthy possession for man. When Paris is approached by the divinities we are given to understand that, on a symbolic level, man is necessarily bound to choose between ultimate goods, that he cannot not choose, and that, finally, whatever choice he makes will inevitably involve him in negative consequences. For the choice for one will bring down on him the wrath of the

others. Simply put "Paris had to choose between warlike discipline, a life devoted to love, and sovranty [sic]; the first was Athene's gift, the last Hera's." Each of the goddesses offered a specific gift: "Athene victory and heroism, Hera empire over Asia and Europe, Aphrodite the possession of Helen, daughter of Zeus."<sup>16</sup> The gift he received depended upon which goddess he judged to be the most beautiful. In prosaic terms, they offered him cultural superiority (Athena), political power and domination (Hera), or a life of pleasure, leisure, and material satisfaction (Aphrodite).

In Greek ethical estimation such a choice of goods was bound to lead to conflict since no one could possess all three types of goods at once. Furthermore, it will not do to claim that a hierarchy of values emerges from this choice, for there is no intrinsic reason why one should be viewed as superior to another. Paris could not have avoided conflict by choosing a different good, since the wrath of the other two would always arise against him. The world of divinities was inevitably a source of trouble for man because the jealousy of prerogative was built into the very fabric of the cosmos. Gods, the highest beings, were no less in opposition to one another than was the experience among men. The darker forces of chaos are necessarily let loose on man regardless what ethical decision he makes. This is simply to say that Homer's *Iliad* presents a tragedy. Men collide with men because men collide with gods (man's symbol for ultimate goods). War, or chaos, is not merely a breakdown of community and amicability on a purely human level; it is an inevitable part of *cosmic* experience. Paris chose Aphrodite's gift. He angered Hera and Athena. This brought the next level of the problem into existence, the confrontation between Achæans and Trojans.

Paris's reward for choosing Aphrodite was Helen. But Helen already belonged to another. In order for her to become Paris's possession she must be taken from some one else. The

16. C. Kerenyi, *The Heroes of The Greeks*, (Thames & Hudson, 1981), pp. 316 & 317.

moral symbolism is apparent. Not only must men choose between ultimate *divine* goods, but the possession of those goods in earthly terms was bound to lead to conflict among men, since in the Homeric (and Greek) economics for one to possess an ultimate good meant to deprive another of it at the same time. The fact that Helen was already one man's possession emphasizes the point that the value offered by Aphrodite was not of a lower order than those offered by the other goddesses. It underscores the moral dilemma, namely, that men are necessarily bound to conflict with one another over ultimate goods. In order for one to possess a particular good, another must be deprived of it. But men, no less than gods, do not take kindly to deprivation. They, too, will view it as a matter of honor and likewise demand vengeance.

Thus, what appears as a trivial matter – a war over a woman – is misleading unless we grasp the moral lesson which the episode is intended to symbolize. For Homer that lesson is that man is impelled to live in a world in which honor, the highest moral requirement, inescapably drives men into confrontation with one another. But it is not entirely man's fault; the gods, those representatives of the goods man requires in order to live the best life possible, force him to choose. Whichever *god* he chooses will rouse the anger of those he rejects. Disorder is the unavoidable result. Life is altogether a great tragedy, the necessary playing out of contradictions on a cosmic level.

This, then, is the background to Homer's actual interest in his narrative: the breakdown of order and the mounting disaster which impends within the ranks of the Achæans (Homer's preferred winners) when on an issue of honor its two greatest men have come into confrontation with one another. It is a clash that derives from the fact of the larger problem, the war itself, for it emerges in the context of the proper division of the spoils of war. Here, again, a dispute arises over possessions which leads to a moral predicament.

The problem begins when Agamemnon, the *king* of the Achæan contingent, claims as a prize of war a woman taken in the successful capture of a Trojan-controlled city. She is the



daughter of a revered priest of the shrine of Apollo, who in his grief dares to request of Agamemnon that his only daughter be returned to him upon the payment of ransom. Agamemnon with furious resentment refuses and, when the priest persists in his request, threatens him with condign punishment. The priest takes his case to Apollo with a prayer for vengeance upon the Achæan leader. He is answered with divine wrath upon the Achæans in the form of a deadly disease that ravages the army. As such a disaster promises to undo the gains of the war and perhaps even lead to defeat, someone must persuade Agamemnon, king though he is, to reconsider his foolish decision to insult the god by treating his priest with contempt. But as kings rule by the authority of Zeus Most High it is a risky business to tell them that they are in the wrong. Undaunted, Achilles, the Achæan's greatest warrior, steps forward and denounces Agamemnon's actions to his face and in the presence of the other nobles. Agamemnon immediately senses his honor as king and the one who has the first choice in the rewards of fighting to be at stake. In bitter anger he agrees to release the girl, but in exchange for another who has become some other man's prize. And since Achilles has insulted him he demands that Achilles be the one to give him his greatest prize, a lovely girl who had been awarded to him on a previous occasion. This compounds the problem, for now Achilles feels that he has been defrauded of his honor, and he withdraws from the fighting and refuses further to take part. With the loss of their greatest warrior the Achæans begin to lose the war. In battle after battle on the plains in front of the city of Troy, the Trojans, under the leadership of Hector, force the Achæans back unto their ships. Unless Achilles can be persuaded to rejoin his companions they are threatened with defeat at the hands of the Trojans. Achilles remains adamant, his wrath is unappeasable. He even induces his mother, the goddesses Thetis, to persuade Zeus to bring defeat on the Achæans until they remove the dishonor that Agamemnon has brought upon him. Agamemnon, in his pride, refuses to give in to him until Achilles recognizes that the authority and privilege of kings, who hold scepter from Zeus, are non-negotiable. He prefers to carry on

the war without Achilles, but he soon learns that his decision is a fatal one. The war, so far as Achæans are concerned, takes a turn for the worse.

Homer offers no real resolution to this problem except, perhaps, to say that the dark forces of chaos and wrath must simply exhaust themselves before order can be restored. For the problem of disorder is not merely an affair in the external realm, but encompasses the very nature of man himself. It seems to rise up from the very depths of his being. Moreover, it is in the nature of the moral imperative, the demand of honor, to require vengeance on all who violate its code. But vengeance, not being founded on any principle other than honor *per se*, easily and quickly takes on an uncontrollable nature of its own. It boils up as an unquenchable *wrath!* Nothing exists to assure that such anger is in accordance with any standard of justice, so that whenever an injustice has been rectified wrath no longer has any just reason to compel the behavior of men. In Homer's world men can live with any disparity or limitation but dishonor. Honor is the supreme due of gods and men alike.

Homer did not intend to say that when wrath is unleashed it is the wickedness of man that is responsible. Man's conduct in wrath is not characterized as guilt but insanity, which comes from the gods. Homer calls it *ate*, and the god who brings it he terms "Folly." In a sense, a man's actions are his own. Thus, when wise old Nestor upbraids Agamemnon by telling him that he gave way to his pride and, in consequence, dishonored a great prince (IX. 116f) Agamemnon replies that he did indeed lose his head and yield to black anger (IX. 130).<sup>17</sup> But Agamemnon also has his self-justification – "I am not to blame. Zeus and Fate and a nightmare Fury are, for putting savage Folly [*ate*] in my mind in the assembly that day, when I wrested Akhilleus' prize of war from him." (XIX. 89-93). Still, wrath unleashed is not easily recalled, especially when honor is at stake. The problem is how to achieve the latter and at the same time overcome the former.

17. All references to the *Iliad* are from the Robert Fitzgerald translation, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974).

Nor is the problem only Agamemnon's; Achilles, too, has his *ate* – he is proud, contentious, obdurate, given to haughtiness and shows a contumacious attitude towards established authority and to his fellow nobles. Achilles' action in withdrawing from the fight is intended to prove to the Achæans that they cannot win without him, that unless he gets his honor restored he will not help them. His wrath, however, soon proves to be a force beyond his control for it leads to the situation that destroys his cherished friend, Patroclus. This serves only to arouse his wrath to a hotter flame. He is moved to war in total cosmic fury against every cosmic force that opposes him. Far from condemning such action, Homer views it as the epitome of god-like behavior and heroic ambition. It is Homer's only way of saying that man can, despite the overwhelming threat of chaos, raise himself to his rightful place in the order of reality.

Here is the difficulty for heroes, men filled with great passions for glory and achievement, yearning to be superior to all others and to have that superiority publicly recognized. On the one hand, "to be robbed of a prize is to be dishonoured," and on the other, "to have great possessions is to have what a king must have in order to be a king."<sup>18</sup> A world fit for heroes must somehow reconcile these disparities, and yet, according to Homer, it is precisely when these occur that the desired opportunities for heroic actions are made possible. Men need order, but just as equally men need chaos in order to compel them to exert their powers to achieve greatness and "leave a name." (Gen. 11: 4)

Much of the problem lies in Homer's definition of the character of man and the reason for his behavior. In Homer man functions in terms of essentially non-rational qualities: *thumos*; *phrene*; *kradie* (desire/wrath; gut instinct/ wisdom; heart/ambition). No rational moral order was available to man to clarify right or wrong behavior. Nor did the gods possess such an order. If man seeks his own glory, on his own terms, it is only because

18. Jasper Griffin, *Homer On Life and Death*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 27.

he must. It is the only moral order he can truly know in a cosmos where disorder is the only alternative. And while disorder will ultimately win out, it is possible by glorious deeds to acquire everlasting fame, and so, in some sense, triumph in spite of all. A world fit for heroes is a world they have made for themselves.

### 5> *God-like Men and Men-like Gods*

With Homer man strives to emerge as more than merely a pawn in a larger cosmic framework. Although the forces of the cosmos, including the dark depths of his own inner nature, would seem to overwhelm and destroy him, nevertheless, according to the Homeric moral vision, he need not suffer abjectly or passively. He believes man possesses the requisite ability to confront his experience and, mortal though he be, accomplish a permanent glory for himself. With the example of heroic deeds as exhibited in Homer's *Iliad*, man is encouraged to see that, despite how utterly threatening the power of chaos appears to be, he can reach inside himself for those moral qualities that will permit him to fashion a culture and civilization that has lasting importance for human purpose. Even if human existence is an ultimate tragedy, there is in man a *power* to transcend his limitations and show that human self-determination can acquire god-like worthiness. Jasper Griffin has ably summed up the Homeric contribution:

The Homeric poems do not tell us that the world was made for man, or that our natural state in it is one of happiness. They do say that it can be comprehended in human terms, and that human life can be more than an insignificant or ignoble struggle in the dark. The human soul can rise to the height of the challenges and the suffering which are the lot of all mankind. That spirit, chastened but not despairing, which sees the world without illusion and confronts it without self-pity or evasion, was the gift of Greece

to the world, and it is the deepest element in the thought of Homer.<sup>19</sup>

However, as we have already indicated, Homer's thought world was full of deities. How could man be so necessarily independent in a world in which the capriciousness and interference of gods was so commonplace a feature? Once again, Homer's answer is to be found in his concept of the hero. In the hero men and gods find their point of contact. The lowly and pitiable life of man is elevated to the divine level by means of the mediation of the hero whose extraordinary qualities are manifestations of god-like powers and attributes. Certain choice individuals, not men-in-general, because they possess greatness from the higher powers and favors of the gods, must be seen as the natural leaders in the struggle for ordered existence on earth. It is through them that the divine order in the cosmos extends to the life of man. The Olympian order of Zeus is a cultural order and the basis of civilization. Unless he can persuade us that gods and men are bound together in one complex society and that a means exists by which man can tap into the greater supernatural powers which alone are able to check the destructive forces of chaos towards which all things tend, Homer would have failed in his attempt to show that human existence can rise above fated mortality and achieve an eternal glory. Heroic *virtues* are the proof of the presence of a divine ordering power among men.

But in Homer's thought world it is not so much that man reaches up as that the gods reach down to him. Homer's legendary heroes lived in a time when "gods intervened openly in human affairs, and it is their passionate concern and personal participation which marks heroic events as possessing significance."<sup>20</sup> Unlike the theomorphic cultures of the East where the gods are distant and, for the most part, disinterested in puny man except to be served by him in slave-like self-abasement, Homer imagines a cosmos in which men are of great and direct concern to the gods. Far from being unmindful of human

19. Jasper Griffin, *Homer*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 78.

20. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death*, p. 81.

goings-on, they are described as those who “watch” the feeble doings of man. Most especially, men, in Homer’s perspective, are “loved” by the gods. But they do not love men in general, only great men, men of heroic quality. That is why in Greek mythology the gods come near to humans and have intimate relations with them. The gods mate with mortals and produce offspring which are said to be “god-born,” and “god-nurtured.” Hence, the gods are seen as ‘the source of specific gifts to certain individuals... good looks...graces of speech...size, strength... good sense...prophetic power...technical skill...inspiration of the poet...,’ etc..<sup>21</sup> By this reaching down to man, man is endowed with extraordinary qualities that, in turn, lift him up and enable him to confront the sinister power of fate and death. His mortal existence is suffused with those characteristics which are the endowment of the immortal ones. Thus, “throughout his poems Homer has his gods appear in such a manner that they do not force man down into the dust; on the contrary, when a god associates with a man, he elevates him, and makes him free, strong, courageous, certain of himself.”<sup>22</sup>

For Homer the powers of the Beyond were essential to the realization of human purposes, but only to the extent that they enabled man to think of himself as in possession of the necessary means to manage on his own. In the ideal of the hero there appeared the god-like qualities needed to imbue human goals with eternal value. While man must eventually die, his cultural creations will achieve everlasting glory. Through heroic struggle with the forces of chaos man can realize an ordered life for the good of man. Man, in Homer, begins to think of himself and his deeds as the product of the divine within himself, and although Homer still thought of those god-like features as coming to man from without, nevertheless he regarded them as innately human. As a result, a humanistic vision of life was opened up to the Greeks which, as its cultural ideals began to take on a more ratio-

21. Mark W. Edwards, *Homer: Poet of the Iliad*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 129.

22. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, p. 32.

nal (i.e., philosophical) character, led to an increasingly man-centered definition of life and purpose. In time, Plato will seek to replace the hero with the philosopher. The latter, although he plays the same role as the hero, as the cultural leader, will do so with less need to think of his powers as the product of an external divine source. The gods will recede farther into the background, if not disappear altogether, and man will emerge to think and act in accordance with abstract and impersonal *ideas*. Reason in man will assume the role of the divine in man and become the power needed to order his life and world. Thus begins the emergence of “the Greek legacy” and with it the humanistic aspect of Western civilization.





## 2 • Plato

### *The Philosophical Ideal*

#### *1▷ Plato Versus Homer*

Homer's influence in forming Greek cultural ideals and their subsequent development can hardly be exaggerated. Beginning early in Greek history, he left his imprint upon each generation of Greeks up to the final flowering of Greek culture in the Hellenistic period. Plato's confession in his *Republic* (595c), "I've had a kind of fascinated admiration for Homer ever since I was young," is a sentiment which no doubt was true for nearly all Greeks, not only in Plato's day but throughout ancient Greek history.<sup>1</sup> No Greek who had any sense of his own cultural identity could possibly feel that Homer was someone alien to him. Homer was the source of everything he believed! Homer's epic poems were the principal tools in the education of the youth, as Plato testifies. Greeks everywhere, and at all times, could not think of themselves as Greek without Homer.

It may seem surprising, therefore, that, despite his singular importance and widespread popularity, Homer, and poetry in general, came under sustained and lethal attack from within the culture itself. Specifically, the attack came from that quarter of Greek thinking represented by philosophy, and, moreover, the point-man in the assault was none other than Plato. Why is this? The issue does not rest on Plato's personal views about poetry in general or Homer's epic poems in particular. It is much more than a dispute with Homer over the aesthetics of his poetic style. For Plato, the issue turned on the difference between the substance or content of poetry, Homer's in particular, and that of philosophy.

According to most modern thinkers, the difference

1. All references to Plato's *Republic* are taken from the Robin Waterfield edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

between Plato and Homer is the difference between science and religion, reason and fantasy, truth and make-believe; in short, between philosophy and myth. Homer's world was a fanciful one in which primitive man accounted for life as arbitrarily invaded by imaginary supernatural agents who capriciously determined all that affected him. Because they lacked a true understanding of the causes of events, the men in Homer's day ignorantly supposed that the incidents which affected them were due, in part, to invisible divine powers in which they naïvely believed. Plato, so the explanation goes, broke with these superstitious beliefs and sought to trace the causes of happenings in man's world to purely *natural* occurrences which have their bases in entirely *rational* explanations. He thereby freed the mind from credulity and ignorance, from believing in nonsense about supernatural beings. From this liberation Western science and technology are alleged to take their beginnings.

Although this modern explanation contains a grain of truth, still the conflict between philosophy and poetry was much more than a contest between science and religion, or reason and myth. It was a dispute between two different *religions*, two different *myths*, within the same cultural mindset. Plato and Homer, because they belonged to the same humanistic world of Greek ideals, shared the same vision of reality. Homer's man-centered outlook was not something against which Plato stood opposed. The idea that man could rise up hero-like and redeem his existence was for Plato not in doubt. That order could somehow triumph over disorder was a view he likewise shared with Homer. How, then, are we to account for Plato's virulent attack on poetry and Homer? The answer lies in the struggle between two different *humanistic* points of view. In Plato's mind, Homer did not develop a fully *humanistic* account of man and society, and of the nature of order and disorder. Homer made life too much dependent upon gods! that is to say, upon *external* or non-human factors ultimately beyond man's control. Since Plato wanted man fully in control of himself and his society, he believed that he must refine the humanism of the inherited Homeric culture from one in which man lives by an order that is

largely the product of unseen and unknown *outside* agents to one in which order is clearly seen to be the result of human endeavor alone. This is no change from religion to science. It is the attempt to establish the religion of humanism on a more certain foundation.

Plato's attack, far from being an attack on the poetic style, was an attack on Homer himself as the universally accepted spokesman for humanistic Greek ideals. Plato knew that Homer was reckoned to be more than a great artist; he was recognized as "the educator of the Greeks." The Greek humanistic world-view was framed by Homer, who was the source of *revelation* integrating the Greek cultural vision. As Havelock points out, Homer "controlled the culture in which he lived for the simple reason that his poetry became and remained the only authorized version of important utterance."<sup>2</sup> It is Homer's *control* of the culture that Plato means to challenge. His authority in the formation of culture must be overthrown, and his role as educator of the Greeks transferred to Plato. Plato, that is *philosophy*, must become the new "authorized version of important utterance." Plato believed that Homeric education did not sufficiently stress the "rational faculty in which alone lies hope of personal salvation and also of scientific assurance."<sup>3</sup>

Havelock's comment, while helpful, requires further elucidation. First, the use of the expression "rational faculty" is a prejudice of modern psychology. Plato did not simply pit one *faculty* of the mind over against another. For him, the issue was the concept of the mind *as such*, and the central role it must play in the fundamental struggle for order against chaos. This is why, second, as Havelock correctly observed, replacing poetry with philosophy was, for Plato, a matter of "personal salvation." Homer's idea of *salvation* through the gods was no salvation at all. He made man dependent upon something or someone other than himself. For Plato, order established by the gods is not one which can guarantee man absolute certainty, that is, can provide

2. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, p. 145.

3. Havelock, p. 26.

him “scientific assurance.” So long as man remains dependent upon the gods he is at the mercy of forces that, because they are unknown, cannot be relied upon or controlled. The Olympian order must be replaced by self-generated order, which arises from the depths of man’s own being. The source of that order must be found in the mind or soul, that is to say, the *reason* and nowhere else.

The fundamental question for Greeks, we may recall from the last chapter, was “what is the explanation of order?” And related to this question was a second, “what are the causes of disorder?” The desire to resolve these questions, far from being abstract and academic in nature, was tied to the belief that, by knowing the answers to them, man would then be in a position to take control of his life and be able to build a culture and civilization that would promote and secure the best life possible for man. The need to do so could not be a matter of indifference or neglect. Identifying the ground of order was viewed with the greatest urgency, for the *salvation* of man from chaos and barbarity were dependent thereon. Without the key to order man lives constantly under the threat of disorder.

From a Christian view, the longing in man, whether past or present, to know the causes of order and disorder is not something man thought up on his own. It was in the nature of man, as first created, to possess an inner inclination to know the order of the world in which he lived. Man was deeply and ineradicably endowed by his Creator with the need to understand the truth about himself and his external surroundings. But it was also made clear to him that he could only know the truth in this respect so long as he acted in obedience to his Creator. Should he disobey, he would be punished and his knowledge taken away. Man did, in fact, disobey, his disobedience stemming from having listened to (i.e., *obeyed*) another voice than that of God, the voice of a would-be god, whose explanations were false, indeed, lies. Because man chose to listen to that other voice, his punishment bears the hallmark of enslavement to that other voice and its lies. At the same time, that other voice proclaimed that man could be his own authority in the matter of all explana-

tions concerning himself and his life in the world. Under its influence man has come to believe that the source of truth lies within himself.

Man was deceived and his life and world were cursed. Scripture speaks of man as having fallen into sin and of his world being reduced to disorder as a result. For this, man alone is responsible. What is more, man is in no position to correct the problem by himself. Man has become confused, he no longer understands the true explanation of order, nor does he admit that the causes of disorder lie in his ethical rebellion against the only true God. Yet, because he remains man, created in the image of his Maker, he cannot escape the need to know the truth about order and disorder. The ancient Greeks are testimony to fallen man's innate desire to solve this problem, but their wish to know the truth in this respect is a manifestation of fallen man's confidence that he can discover it on his own and so proclaim his own endeavors as the solution.

Homer's principal contribution to this *humanistic* ambition can be found in his attempt to explain the "causes of disorder," as well as the basis of order, as made possible only "under the gods."<sup>4</sup> In a way, this is to be expected of men who stood fairly early in the history of the race, for at this early date the sense of dependence with which man had been created to live under God was not to be easily effaced from his conscience. While man wanted to be the locus of truth in all questions which pertained to his life and world, much, however, eluded his grasp and the experience of disorder seemed too great for man to control on his own. If some order did exist, it appeared as something which came to him from without. Some power or powers greater than man must be responsible. Still, order did not come ready made from the gods. Their actions, too, were at times the causes of disorder. Somehow man and gods must strive together to fashion order. Homer never meant to claim that order came from the gods whereas disorder was from man. His gods were not absolute. In some sense, man, too, must be the source of

4. Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, p. 71.

order, even as in some sense, he was responsible for disorder. But Homer could not imagine that just any men could perform so exalted a task; his world of thought required that great men, *heroes* endowed with *divine* attributes, be the natural leaders in the struggle to save man from the abyss of chaos. In later Greek intellectual development, Homer's notion of the role of heroic human agents would continue to inspire thought, but their connection to a world of invisible divinities would come under severe attack. To complete this attack, the nature of heroic action would have to be transformed. This, not the impulse of *science*, inspired the rise of philosophy. Or, rather, Greek philosophy and science were imbued with a deeply religious motive.

Thus, while Homer talked of order as something which involved *gods* in its establishment, he was concerned to show that man was needed as well. This *humanistic* component, while historically a part of early Greek ideals, did not satisfy later Greek thinkers who began to purge all features from their world view that did not leave matters exclusively in man's control. All Greeks believed that order must be *divine*, but divine order as explained in Homer was insufficient by itself to reveal that order to man who must himself *inwardly* grasp and reconstruct that order, thereby making the *soul* the true source of order. Furthermore, Homer did not explain the causes of disorder such that man could know their principles. Without a proper understanding of disorder, it would be impossible to set the explanation of order over against it. No *gospel* of salvation could be proclaimed against chaos and degeneration if one did not know their exact causes. With Homer, human thought had not yet reached *autonomy*, that is, had not yet reached the stage of independence from other than self-justifying motives. It was not yet the sole source of all truth about itself and its world. If we are to understand anything about Greek philosophy, especially Plato, we must recognize that central to the *salvation* of man and society is the belief that the "[r]estoration of order could only come from the soul that had *ordered itself* by attunement to the divine measure."<sup>5</sup>

It has been said that "Homeric man has not awakened to

the fact that he possesses in his own soul the source of his own powers [but instead] he receives them as a... donation from the gods.”<sup>6</sup> Homer did not grasp the role of the *logos*, the reason, which, according to philosophy, is the essential nature of the soul. He saw only the *passions* of both gods and men, that neither could be explained according to some standard of rational conduct. The only controlling motive was, as we mentioned, the need to be honored. But this was not something like an absolute truth in Homer, or an inviolable principle of conduct. Both men and gods are possessed of this ambition, but it does not represent a universal standard of just behavior. Consequently, no internal or mental power acts in either man or gods to enable them to see or adhere to an invariable order of things. That being so, philosophy was bound to ask, why should man look to the gods as a *higher* aid to order in his life? If man does not have the power in his own inner self to erect order, justice and a common social life for man, and the gods are devoid of it as well, why should he expect any help from the gods? And if man does have the power, as philosophy came to believe, why should the gods be necessary? At no point do the gods constitute a *transcendent* order, therefore a definitive rule for human purpose and action. But if man needs some standard of action, where is it to be found? If it does not come from the gods, it can only come from man. Homer’s concept of the hero produced the first standard in Greek ideals. From their great self-esteem and desire to achieve glory they provide a model that man can relate to and imitate. But Homer’s heroes, lacking the *logos*, do not comprehend that order must first be apprehended by the mind before it can be achieved by means of the will-to-act. This is what philosophy seeks to clarify.

For the most part, Plato carried out his attack on Homer in Books III & X of his *Republic*. Early in that work Plato has Socrates, his spokesman, endeavoring to define what is considered to be the most important question having to do with order,

5. Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, p. 43. (emphasis mine)

6. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, p. 21.

the question of what is justice. Unless he can answer this question to complete satisfaction, all attempts to create a world for man to live in, he believes, are foredoomed to failure. Socrates proposes that the best way to discover the answer to this question must lie in an attempt to erect a social community, for only then will it be possible to see what justice truly is. Justice, the proper ordering of life, can exist in human society, but not in just any society, only when the best kind of society is conceived. That type of society is made possible when a clear distinction is shown to be necessary between rulers and ruled. Justice, in Platonic thought, is more a matter of organization and social arrangement than of law or principle. Everything depends, then, entirely upon fostering the right relationship between those who should be the natural masters and those who should be the natural slaves. Some men, according to Plato, are by nature the right men to give commands, whereas others, for the same reason, are best fitted to obey. Justice will be found when the best and wisest are put in charge of everyone else.

However, Plato believed that it was more than a matter of putting the right men by nature in charge of the community, for these sorts of men do not appear from nowhere. Rather, philosophy was needed to insure that what nature produced was properly cultivated for the task of governing. Consequently, these men, whom he called the guardian class, must also undergo a rigorous education, so that they will rule by reason of superior insight into the good of the whole and not solely by reason of brute force. Their rule, in other words, must be in accordance with knowledge, not merely according to the threat of violence. Nor, presumably, must it redound to their own aggrandizement, rather it must be exercised for the good of society. That is, they must rule on behalf of the state, not private interest. The question, then, is how are they to be educated? What models must they pattern their actions after? At this point the nub of the issue between Plato and Homer comes to the forefront. Homer and the poets had long been the accepted *educators* of rulers. In the *Republic*, which is Plato's treatise on the education of rulers, he intends to show them as having failed to educate rulers for their



proper role by alleging that the traditional models they used did not lead to a correct understanding of the state nor inspire rulers to love the state and its good over all private good including their own. They were unable to do so because, in fact, they taught that *personal* honor and glory were the highest motives by which both gods and men could possibly act. To live by such *selfish* ideals was to offer us rulers who were no better than the ruled whose only interest was to satisfy their senses and appetites. Such behavior in time leads to conflict and the breakdown of order. Rulers must be educated to live and act according to that which lies beyond the material and therefore not subject to change or decay. They must live and rule in accordance with things only perceived by the mind, namely, the *Ideas*, or as Plato called them, the *Forms*.

If Plato believed that justice, that is order, would be found when the rulers were properly educated, he did not think it necessary to educate the people. The well-ordered state is made possible only when the right kind of rulers are in charge. It is irrelevant, even dangerous, to permit the people any responsibility for the concerns of the state. Because they are chiefly interested in their private material well-being, they cannot be expected to take a disinterested view of the good of the state. Only men (and women) who have been carefully selected and properly bred to the job of ruling will know how to act for the good of the whole, for they will have been purged from all subjective motives in deciding and acting, and will rule in accordance with superior knowledge of the Forms.

To educate the rulers they will need “exercise for the body and cultural studies for the mind.” (*Republic*, 376e) The physical exercises were secondary, or so Plato would have us believe. In fact, only rulers would be in physical condition. They must be strong and capable of taking concerted military action against any threat. Presumably that threat was external. But Plato also believed that it must be used against the people themselves if necessary. The people must be kept unarmed and untrained for combat in case they were to rebel against the rulers.

Education was also to be literary, that is, by means of

stories. Plato asserted that there were two kinds of stories: true and untrue kinds. (377a) Rulers must only be taught the true kind. Homer and the poets have all taught untrue kinds. Plato's most serious charge is that they have given "a distorted image of the nature of the gods and heroes...." (377e) Thus, Plato attacks Homer for presenting *lies* about those who were responsible for the maintenance of order and culture. Plato deplored the fact that the stories about gods presented them as immoral and irrational, "fighting and scheming and battling against one another...." (378c) How could they be models of culture if their behavior indicated that they, too, were subject to the forces of chaos and corruption? It showed that gods were themselves subject to *change* and *becoming*. Far from being above temporality, they were, like men, moved by the *lower impulses* of the body and emotions. In Homer, and all the poets, time and motion took precedence over rest and eternity. Accordingly, the gods do not represent permanent standards. Heroes who imitate them are moved more by *selfish* interests than by universal norms, which means that man is not truly in control of himself or his world. Men will be easily driven by motives that lead to conflict and disputes. Consequently, rulers must be taught to believe that *God* is always good, that is to say, that he never changes and is always what he is, namely, perfect. (379a & 381b)

It would be easy to conclude that this dispute between Plato and Homer was simply a matter of saying the right things about the gods as if both were in agreement on what was meant by the word *gods*. But that is far from the case. When Plato says that *God* must "always be portrayed as he really is" (379a), he has changed from the use of the plural to that of the singular. He means to redefine the nature of divinity while continuing to use the traditional word. But he does not accept the gods, he believes in God, that is, in an invisible world of permanent things which are accessible only to the mind. God, in his view, does not change and, therefore, is always good. Furthermore, He must not be understood as responsible for everything, only for a small portion. As Plato states, "[h]e and he alone must be held responsible for the good things ... [and] responsibility for bad things

must be looked for elsewhere.” (379c) What Plato means is that the world of Forms, the good things, is not the reason for the existence of the other side of things, namely, matter which affects us adversely. The Forms are permanent, which is to say, eternal, whereas matter and physical reality (the bad things) are constantly subject to change. The world of mind alone is good, the realm of matter is always bad. Nevertheless, it is by means of the good things (Forms) that matter is brought under control and subjected to order and purpose, for by means of the permanent things which the mind grasps is the changeable realm of matter made to submit. Rulers, therefore, must be educated in the good things of the mind and learn to shun the things of the body and material reality. Then they will learn the right way to build and govern a perfect world, for they will have patterned their thinking in accordance with the perfect and unchanging *God*.

Homer explained the gods as if they were persons like men, thereby giving a personal attribute to everything that happened in the realm of external phenomena.<sup>7</sup> Plato disposed of the personal character of the gods and transformed them into an impersonal *God*. The struggle to control the humanistic agenda of Greek cultural ideals required that the only *personal* being be man himself. All else must be impersonal so that man can then impress his personality upon it. Plato meant to offer a new educational program for training the rulers, one which would require them to act in terms of impersonal ideas as the “divine measure.” Once they attune their souls to that measure by means of a rigorous dialectical procedure, they will intellectually merge with the world of the Forms and become one, and thereby realize through themselves the only *gods* that men will ever need.

Plato’s attack on Homer and poetry is the culmination of a long struggle by philosophy to achieve control of the formation of humanistic culture in the ancient world. Far from initiating

7. W.C.K. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. I, *The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 26.

the conflict, Plato himself avers that the opposition between philosophy and poetry is “an ancient quarrel.” (607b) It is no academic dispute, for the prejudices of the masses are deeply involved. Their minds have been deformed by the false explanations of those who, like Homer, have fed them *representations* of the mere images of reality but not the truth, not reality itself. People listen to the poets and believe what they say because they appeal to what is base and gratifying to their senses and feelings, what Plato calls “their irrational side.” (605b) In so doing, the poets destroy the rational part. They teach that man is essentially a bundle of emotional responses to the world around him and represent the truth of man and his relationship to the world as “far from intelligence.” (603a,b) People are easily deceived by the poets because they are especially skillful in making “us feel particularly strong feelings.” (605d) Far from teaching men to rise above their passions and subjective feelings, which are due to our sensual, bodily nature, the poets reinforce the people’s prejudices by appealing to their appetites and desires. Consequently, the poet stirs the wrong motives, rousing men to extremes rather than teaching them to be in control of themselves and their world. “When the part of us which is inherently good has been inadequately trained in habits enjoined by reason, it relaxes its guard over this other part, the part which feels....” (606a) In Plato’s view, “poetic representation ... irrigates and tends to these things when they should be left to wither, and it makes them our rulers when they should be our subjects, because otherwise we won’t live better and happier lives, but quite the opposite.” (606d) To replace poetry with philosophy is an urgent matter, for the foundation of order, and the good of man’s life, depend upon it.

## 2> *Hesiod and the Beginnings of Speculation*

Before we can discuss the outgrowth of philosophy in the period prior to Plato, that of the so-called Presocratics, we must notice that the Greek mind, even in the heyday of the poets, had

always sought to frame the world along some sort of rational line. While the world was filled with gods, it was never thought that truth about the gods, and hence about human social order, was a matter of revelation from the gods. At the very least, the poet regarded himself as possessing within himself the requisite explanatory power to articulate matters as he saw fit. The Greeks, more than any other people in the ancient world, firmly believed that man's ability to speculate on the nature of reality was essential to the formation of truth and order. While the Greek mind was intensely religious, its deepest concern was to discover the key to the nature of the cosmos as the product of rational introspection. Everything in man's world, including the gods, must conform to man's interpretation. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the works of that other great poet of antiquity, Hesiod.

Although we have not mentioned Hesiod, his importance to ancient Greeks (and Romans) was nearly as great as that of Homer. Cicero, for example, in the *Tusculan Disputations*, when he discusses the comparison between Roman and Greek poets, and why the latter were for so long superior to the former, mentions Homer and Hesiod together as if they were equal in the formation of Greek poetry, as if, in other words, like Romulus and Remus, they were viewed as co-founders. And Plato, who mentions Homer by name repeatedly, mentions no other poets specifically except Hesiod. What is more, Hesiod is mentioned along side Homer as if, once again, they represent a duo. Clearly, Hesiod, too, deserves credit for helping to shape Greek ideals.

While Hesiod also looked at the world and man through the *myth*, that is, through the gods, he did so only as the myth itself had been systematically and rationally organized. Hesiod presented the world of the gods, not so much as actors in the affairs of man, but as an ordered species of living beings. He arranged them according to their proper groupings like a modern biologist seeks to classify living organisms. Hesiod, moreover, provided something that Homer was not so clear about, namely, an explanation of the *origin* of the gods and why the Olympian order exists as necessarily good for men. In this,

Hesiod shows the first inclination in the evolving humanism of the need not only to understand the nature of order, but of the belief that the solution to the order-disorder problem depends upon the mind of man knowing absolutely the origin or beginnings of all things. It was not the Presocratic thinkers who first purported to explain origins, it was Hesiod. What Hesiod showed was that man could know the truth of the matter merely by the resources of his own intellect. With Hesiod begins the humanist tradition of belief in the mind of man to be able to speculate on ultimate questions and to know with confidence the secrets of the universe.

Hesiod, then, although a poet, represents the first step in the direction of philosophy by his attempt to discuss the role of the gods in an abstract and systematic manner. In his *Theogony* "the myth is submitted to a conscious intellectual operation, with the purpose of reshaping its symbols in such a manner that a 'truth' about order with universal validity will emerge."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Hesiod is not merely interested in recounting the deeds of gods and heroes, he intends to step back, as it were, and by the powers of his own intellect set the explanation of ultimate truth into a formula conducive to the reason of man and agreeable to his needs. How important this is can be understood from Hesiod's personal interest in the victory of the Olympian order of the gods over the older nature divinities, a triumph of *dike* (justice) and ethical order over savagery and demonic cruelty represented by the Titans. The final order of the world, won in war by Zeus and his followers, represents a cosmos and is a retribution against the forces of chaos and darkness whether they arise from gods or men. Consequently, Hesiod can confidently use the threat of transcendent vengeance against his brother who has defrauded him of his property.

This first step in the direction of philosophy was no ivory tower affair, but it derived from an urgent desire to establish a world in which man was able to find the key to social and ethical order, and offer a guarantee against the forces of chaos as exem-

8. Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, p. 126.

plified by injustices and wrongs which men experienced from other men. Hesiod's importance lies in his having empowered the intellect of man as the chief means by which the nature of order and disorder could be interpreted, and so lifted man above the necessity of fate and placed him in a position to define for himself the reality that he alone would approve of and submit to. Next to the *order of the gods* Hesiod set the *order of the mind*. It would become the task of the Milesian thinkers to continue this line of development.

### 3> Presocratics: Re-locating the Divine

If the origins of Western speculative thinking, how ever tentative, can be traced to the Greek poets, Hesiod especially, nevertheless it was not until the rise of early Greek philosophy, we are told, that its true dimensions began to appear. The Presocratics, those so-called early Greek naturalists, were the first to explain the mysteries of the world entirely in rational terms. They are said to have discovered the principles of reason which have enabled us to know with confidence the uniformity of nature and the causes of events, rather than, like their superstitious forebears, assigning them to the capricious wills of supernatural agents. No longer would they accept an explanation of the reason for order from other than what was observable to sense perception and explainable by man's intellect. They spoke of the realm of *nature* as an autonomous realm. That is, "[n]ature was to be explained in terms of nature itself, not of something fundamentally beyond nature, and in impersonal terms rather than by means of personal gods and goddesses."<sup>9</sup> "[It] is," furthermore, "the recognition that natural phenomena are not the products of random or arbitrary influences, but regular and governed by determinable sequences of cause and effect."<sup>10</sup>

9. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 20.

This explanation of the rise of philosophy is by now the standard one. The replacement of man-made gods with a world that has some basis in logic, governed by principles which the mind can know with accuracy and assurance, is universally taken to be the first step in the direction of Western knowledge and science, and the foundation of its intellectual culture. Everywhere it is agreed that early Greek thought derived from the wish to unfetter understanding from the clutches of religious fable and legend, the root causes of irrational fear and oppressive credulity, the bane of mankind. Early Greek thinkers, driven by a newly awakened aspiration to know the workings of the world as an intrinsic facet of human interest, set Western man on the course of progress and civilization, of which we today are the heirs and beneficiaries

This explanation of the rise of Greek philosophy, while it possesses a grain of truth, should not be seen as a product of man's normal curiosity to understand why things are as they are or work in the way that they do. Moreover, it was more than just a struggle between science and religion. Their interest was to shift the locus of *ordering power* from the gods to the mind of man, so that the mind of man becomes the source of order and is able to govern reality according to principles innate in the reasoning power of man alone. No order truly exists, they taught, until the power of human logic discloses that order to man's searching gaze. Of course, the Greek thinker often imagines that he derives his principles from a source *outside* the mind of man, from such things as Plato later called the *Forms* or *Ideas*. These immaterial entities were alleged to exist in reality and not just in the mind. But they long remained hidden from view, behind the outward material and sensible phenomena, until the philosopher penetrated to their inner essence and showed them to be the conclusion of his reason. Man's control of his world depended upon a theoretical grasp of these *ideas*, for no *power* over nature was thought possible without total comprehension of the invi-

10. G. E. R. Lloyd, *Early Greek Science: Thales to Aristotle*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1970), p. 8.



ble essence of all that exists. On the surface, order might appear to be in the world, but no order has any usefulness unless and until it is made correlative to the reason of man. The Presocratics shifted *divinity* from gods to man, but not just to man in general, rather to intellectual or philosophical man! Science did not mean freedom from religion, but a new religion of intellectual man who replaces the gods and orders reality in accordance with his reason.

The forerunners of Plato (and Aristotle), the founders of Western humanistic thought, inhabited the eastern and western fringes of the ancient Greek world. The Greeks, living near the sea, were a venturesome and colonizing people. History records that they were often cramped for space and thus compelled to disperse abroad in order to find more habitable room. They moved in both a westerly and easterly direction and founded new cities on distant shores. However, they continued to maintain contacts with the homeland and retained their Greek identity. On these opposite shores Greek civilization first took hold and flourished. Too, it was here that the Greeks' love of *new ideas* also began to dawn. Beginning with the Ionians (East), but soon followed thereafter by confident innovators in southern Italy (West), philosophy eventually replaced the gods as the source of order in the world.

In Ionia, on the shores of Asia Minor, the so-called Milesian (all citizens of Miletus) thinkers were the first to attempt an explanation of the world as due to entirely naturalistic causes.<sup>11</sup> Their names are Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. All were known to each other, for each was the teacher of the next. We have, then, in these Milesian thinkers something of a school of thought. In their day Miletus was a thriving and wealthy metropolis, the leading city of its day, followed by Ephesus. It had wide contacts, extending from Mesopotamia and Egypt to South Italy and beyond. As a center of trade it had ready access to material goods and resources inland which it shipped abroad. Its magnifi-

11. The ideas of the Milesian thinkers are to be found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Bk. A.

cent harbor transformed it into the greatest export-import entrepot on the coast of Asia Minor. But it was also a leading manufacturing city whose finished products were the envy of the nations.

Like all Greek cities of its time, its leading citizens were aristocrats. However, rather than living the knightly ideal typified by Homer's audience, the aristocracy in Miletus had become enamored of luxury and material comforts. Although they continued to dominate public affairs, a growing bourgeois citizenry whose wealth gave them a greater voice in government helped to break down the tribal mentality of earlier centuries and loosen the grip of power and prestige that was for so long associated with rigid class divisions. These political and social transformations in turn furthered changes at the level of traditional customs and beliefs, giving vent to a new broad-mindedness and skepticism regarding the official dogmas of the city's religion. For many the visible wealth of the city and the high standard of living were seen to be the result of human energy and initiative. In this context, it is not surprising, traditional religion declined and a more worldly and materialistic attitude prevailed. When it came time for the new thinkers, men originally from the aristocratic classes, to take stock, naturally they tended to reflect less on the role of the gods and more on the world of nature which had so obviously yielded up its wealth and secrets to human labor and ingenuity. At the same time, the new wealth supplied the opportunity for the leisure to think and reflect on the nature of things and on man who has exercised his own skill and brought forth such wealth.

"Philosophy and science" declares Guthrie, "start with the bold confession of faith that not caprice but an inherent *orderliness* underlies the phenomena... the explanation of nature is to be sought within nature itself."<sup>12</sup> This remark, though prejudicially modern, nevertheless ably summarizes the new attitude which Greek humanists, beginning with Thales, were wont to proclaim. In this outlook one can observe that in exchange for

12. Guthrie, *The Earlier Presocratics*, p. 44.

*faith* in the gods as the source of order there is substituted a new faith in an *inherent* order, one not in need of extra-human personalities to make it possible. It is order that is non-personal and altogether unconnected to the decisions or wills of an ordering mind, at least any mind other than man's. Nature, in this perspective, gets its order from nature and from nothing else. This is the part that modern man likes to emphasize most in the Presocratics, nature as self-ordering. Furthermore, natural order is inherently intelligible, which enabled nature to be viewed as an order that could be rationally penetrated by man's mind. The Greek philosophers might continue to speak of order as *divine*, but divinity in this sense was a theoretical construct and altogether abstract. Divine meant nature as a permanent, unchangeable, eternal and completely rational order in and of itself. Still, nature's order, although innate in nature itself, would seem to require some explanation of its ordering principle. How did nature act as the cause of nature? Even if nature were an inherent order, the Greek mind could not rest content with the mere claim. They wanted especially to know and explain its cause.

Thales' proposal that water should be the source of natural order, the cause of all things, has usually been received with a smile. His student, Anaximander, was perhaps somewhat less puzzling with his claim that a "boundless," or "unlimited" (*apeiron*) was the *arche* or first principle from which all else has descended. Then along came Anaximenes, his younger contemporary, who said that air constituted the creative principle of all things, and once again we think "how odd" and quickly move on. However, given the assumption that nature is the reason for nature, the thinker must seek for something innate in nature to explain the cause of its existence. To all appearances nature is physical and material. Therefore, the cause of its existence must be material as well. And that cause must be some one thing, for nature is one, a unity. That is what defines it as an order, it all fits together. So only one ordering principle can be the cause of nature, and it must come from nature. Besides, many *gods* would be a source of disorder. Consequently, each gave as his explanation some one thing in nature that seemed best suited to fulfill

the role of the first or ordering principle.

In truth, these early Milesians needed to explain the origins of life, of man's life especially. This accounts for the peculiar choices selected to act as ultimate causes. Water is necessary to living things, a sustainer of life, apart from which living things die. Water teems with life and is an abundant source of life for man. Of natural things that were indispensable to the life of man and animals none seemed more so than water. This would seem especially so for the Greeks who were inclined to be a sea-faring people. Would it not be natural to put faith in water as the ultimate cause of natural order and life? Much the same could be said for air. Air was associated with *breath* which higher living things need and possess. With Anaximenes, it would seem that ridding thought of an entirely personal divinity (living and breathing) was not easy, especially when it came to explaining the existence of other living beings. Life must at least be the cause of life. And as life is associated with the soul and the soul is similar to air, then air must be the ultimate cause of both living and non-living things.

But what should we make of Anaximander's "boundless?" It must be said that while he along with the other two strongly desired an explanation of nature that derived from nature itself, still he could not convince himself that the order he experienced *in* nature was altogether caused *by* nature. For how could that which is caused (natural order) at the same time be the cause? As caused, nature was *bound* or *limited* to what it is. But the principle of all that is caused must itself be uncaused, that is, *unbounded*. It must also be beyond man's physical perception, for what is caused is material and matter cannot be both the cause and what is caused at the same time. Yet, man must be able to grasp it with his reason, otherwise man is left with the unknowable and unpredictable, that is, he is back with the gods. Anaximander, consequently, cleverly invented an explanation that would seem to satisfy the mind of man that life and order have a cause, but at the same time placed it beyond the possibility of discovery by the senses of man, thereby relieving him of the need to invent odd material explanations like water or air. It

also exalted the man of reason, for only he would understand the concept of a “boundless” and why it was necessary to the ordering of nature.

To the Milesians the formation of the cosmos was the key to explaining the order that man needed in order to live in the world. They wanted no order that would be at the mercy of willful and arbitrary supernatural agents. They only believed in an order that nature gave to herself. Nature had self-producing powers. To discover the order of nature it was only necessary to study nature and she would reveal her secrets to man’s inquiry. Man would see that the self-generation of nature required no hiatus or unnatural intrusions in nature. Instead, nature revealed itself as an order that fit neatly with the reason of man. Nature was logical. When it came to the origin of nature, the Milesians were the first in a long line of Western humanist thinkers to insist that “the causes operating in the beginning were to be regarded as the same kind as those which we see operating now.”<sup>13</sup> Otherwise, natural order would resist rational control, and that is what was desperately demanded.

Still, to rely upon a concept of nature as a self-generating order laid open the idea that nature works without any purpose or design, something that, however capricious, could at least be attributed to the gods. Every explanation of the formation and working of natural order was reduced to abstract causation devoid of intrinsic purpose. Purely mechanical causation leaves the basis of moral order in doubt. How could man build civilization without a moral order? How could the impersonal produce the personal? Where do morality and society fit in with this view? Life reduces to a matter of the strong oppressing the weak, a seemingly *natural* occurrence. The early Milesian thinkers had freed man from the gods but had failed to find the basis for a civilization constructed solely by and for man, an order in which justice triumphed over injustice. Perhaps it was for this reason that early Greek philosophy took a decidedly different direction with the rise and spread of Pythagoreanism.

13. Guthrie, *The Earlier Presocratics*, p. 140.

Pythagoras lived at the opposite end of the Greek world in South Italy (Magna Graecia), a man who, if he is mentioned at all, is recalled for his unique discoveries in the realms of math and music. Who after all, in the study of triangles, has not learned the “theorem of Pythagoras?” Most, then, have wanted to see him merely as an inventor of rational mathematical and harmonic theorems and nothing more. However, his interest in numbers and scales had no *scientific* purpose as understood by modern man. As Guthrie correctly observed, “[T]here is no ground for separating the religious from the philosophical or scientific side in a system like the Pythagorean. In contrast to the Milesian tradition, it undertook philosophical researches with the conscious purpose of making them serve as a basis for religion.”<sup>14</sup> Pythagoras, in other words, used philosophy as a tool for teaching man how to live.

At the heart of Pythagoras’s inquiries and teaching was the belief that philosophy was about nothing more nor less than discovering and living the best life possible. He shifted philosophy away from speculative questions concerning origins, or the order of nature by itself, to an exclusive interest in man and man’s well-being. However, he was no simple mystic, he saw philosophy, as rational inquiry, to be necessary. But philosophy’s usefulness lay in what it taught about man, in particular, what it taught of the nature of the soul and its role in the cosmos. Philosophy was seen as a means to teach the truth about man as nothing less than man’s *salvation*, for philosophy showed that the order of truth in reality was, at the same time, an order of truth in the soul of man. By discovering the one, man would be assured of discovering the other. Philosophy was the means to cultivate the soul so that it would become one with the truth of reality, and in so doing achieve a *higher* life on an eternal plane.

For Pythagoras it was the soul, the inner nature of man, that had central importance. How could the soul find the key to the triumph of life over the dissolution of death? The soul was the spirit in man, but much more besides. Its nature as an order-

14. Guthrie, *The Earlier Presocratics*, p. 152.

ing *power* through rational penetration of the order of reality gave it precedence over everything else in man's life. In fact, it was Pythagoras who first insisted that all material reality, including the body of man, was of no value to the best life possible. Only the soul, because it was immaterial, mattered. Furthermore, matter was a cause of *impurity* (ignorance) in the soul. Philosophy was needed to purify the soul from the taint of matter. The goal of the philosophical life must be to escape from the world of matter and to reconnect with the world-soul, an existence in which the harmonious mind meets with a total rationality and logical coherence and becomes incapable of perishing or error.

In order to cultivate the soul it was necessary to seek for an understanding of the governing structures of the divine cosmos. One must engage the intellect in a study of the relevant fields that correspond with the realm of order in the cosmos: number-theory, geometry, music and astronomy. But knowledge of these matters was no idle curiosity. Rather, the soul, by having acquired such knowledge, would undergo a transformation, enabling it to achieve conformity with the *divine*. Philosophy (science), in Pythagoras's view, is the means to the divinization of man. When the soul, through much labor, has at last gazed upon the harmony and order of the divine cosmos, it will itself become harmonious and ordered, a belief that will re-emerge at the outset of the modern world with the Renaissance.

Pythagoras did not promote his ideas as if they had no connection to man's life here and now. Indeed, he believed that those who cultivated their souls ought also to be put in charge of all human affairs, especially the state. As Eduard Zeller comments, "[T]he Pythagoreans felt themselves called to the spiritual guidance of their fellow-countrymen – i.e., to rule."<sup>15</sup> Pythagoras himself had at one time been the undisputed leader of Croton, his adopted city. And Pythagoreans continued to insinuate themselves into positions of rulership in other cities.

15. Eduard Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1980), p. 32.

They formed in many respects a secret society, like modern day Freemasons, with ambitions to take control of human society and construct it in accordance with their peculiar vision of perfect rational order. It was not enough that they aspired to an individual salvation, they felt compelled to save society as well. None of the early Presocratic thinkers will leave a more lasting impression on Plato's own thinking than Pythagoras. Pythagoras was the first to speak of intellectual elites being put in charge of shaping society in accordance with a rational plan that they have devised for themselves. Their legacy to the West has been profound.

No discussion of early Greek philosophy can fail to mention Heraclitus and Parmenides. Others might perhaps be considered, but these must be included. For they, more than most, helped to shape Plato's own thinking and, hence, played a greater role in the formation to Western humanistic intellectualism in general. Of the two, Heraclitus came earlier. However, Parmenides' solution to problems introduced by Heraclitus were even more instrumental in the inspiration of Plato's distinct philosophical agenda, which was, namely, to find permanence and order in the midst of continual change and degeneration. Therefore, we start with Parmenides.

Parmenides came from a wealthy and noble family of Elea in southern Italy. His outlook on life was shaped by his class background, but also by Xenophanes under whom he studied and by the ideas of the Pythagoreans. Xenophanes became famous for his denunciation of Homer and Hesiod for their anthropomorphic representations of the gods. He undoubtedly convinced Parmenides that the traditional gods were mainly the invention of the popular imagination, and that one could not truly believe that man's life must depend upon such unreliable fables. The way of truth must be found in philosophy, that is, in man's ability to contemplate the nature of things with his mind unfettered by superstitions or preoccupied with worldly concerns. Xenophanes taught that nature and Deity are interchangeable and inseparable. Divinity is identical with the *being* of all things which only the *enlightened* mind can see without preju-



dice.<sup>16</sup> Parmenides also learned of philosophy as the higher life of elite wisdom from his friend Ameinias, the Pythagorean, who taught that by acquiring knowledge of the numerical and harmonic *forms* of things Parmenides would be best fitted not merely to order his own life well, but society's, too. Knowledge was the key to power and government.

Parmenides is probably the first real philosopher in the ancient world since he is the first to free thinking from everything that is not thought, that is, from sense perception. He is the first, in other words, to view reality as the product of a theoretical reflection, as an intellectual abstraction. For Parmenides the order of the world is an order of Being which exists only when and as the mind of man specifically thinks of it. Being is what *is* and cannot be observed by ordinary everyday sensual experience which is too much influenced by empirical *things*. Being only appears to the reflecting mind when man severs his thought from all sensuous experience, for the senses perceive many things which come and go and these do not truly *exist*. Being, however, does not change or come and go, but remains what it is. It alone is real, because it is not subject to beginning or end, coming into existence or passing away. Being is not this or that, but is simply existence in general. All things have a share in Being because they are products of Being. Here was Parmenides' answer to the Milesian's attempt to explain the origin of all things. He proclaimed Being as the source of what is but which itself is "uncreated and imperishable."<sup>17</sup>

Since Being is known only by means of a philosophical reflection, it *is* to the extent it is *conceived*.<sup>18</sup> That is, Being is correlative to the *nous* or mind of man. Being is what thought perceives when all thinking has been purified of all non-intellectual influences, that is, when sense perception is neither required nor present. Because what is sensed seems to come to man from something outside himself, or at least is caused by external

16. See, e.g., Guthrie, *The Earlier Presocratics*, pp. 373–383.

17. See, e.g., G.S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1975). p. 273.

18. Kirk & Raven, p. 277.

things, it is such as not to be relied upon. Man cannot be certain of anything that is not wholly his own. *Nous* or mind, however, is his own, and his reflection upon the Being of things does not begin from an external source but arises in his reason and therefore alone is reliable. Anything that is not absolutely certain to the mind of man is a source of all that is not true or erroneous. Truth, then, is in the mind of the philosopher who alone is able to *see* Being. Parmenides was laying the groundwork for what in the West would take on the aura of the autonomy and infallibility of science. In other words, critical speculation is the sole legitimate means to the discovery of Truth and the mind need submit to nothing but its own logical processes.<sup>19</sup> We might say that Parmenides was a Cartesian before Descartes.

Being, then, has no predicates which might describe it, for then it would be seen to be like material things. These latter begin and end, change and die, can be divided or become what they are not. Men who live in terms of changeable things are easily fooled and led astray. However, Being is immovable, unchangeable; it cannot be anything other than what it is. It is eternal and beyond time, that is, "it is without beginning or end".<sup>20</sup> Thought which grasps it is also beyond time and error. In the *nous* or *logos* (reason) of man resides the possibility of achieving an eternal state, one that is freed from all temporality and passing away, and also from ignorance and deception. Being for Parmenides was the *ens realissimum* (supreme reality): nothing lay beyond Being. Since thought is correlative to Being, thought too participates in its supreme, unchanging reality. "Thought is not different from Being; for it is only thought of Being."<sup>21</sup> By reason of the *nous* (mind) or *logos* (reason) man becomes divine. Now he who is divine is he who *orders* the cosmos.

Voegelin writes, "In the medium of speculation the philosopher reproduces Being itself; the well-rounded sphere of Being

19. See, e.g., Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, pp. 207–214.

20. Kirk & Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 276.

21. Zeller, *Outlines*, p. 50.

becomes the well-rounded sphere of speculative order. Philosophical speculation is an incarnation of the Truth of Being.”<sup>22</sup> Not any man, therefore, acquires the status of *orderer* of the cosmos, only the philosopher (scientist). Confirmed in this belief, Parmenides set up a dichotomy between the truth of Being as grasped by the *reason* of the philosopher and the untruth of what he called the *doxai* (opinion or beliefs) of the masses, a distinction that would be even more fundamentally upheld by Plato. Those who see the Truth by the mind do not erroneously conclude that order is a product of generation from non-order. The realm of Being is not material and physical and so not subject to change and decay, but precedes material things and is the source of their existence. Nor does Being have any of the distortions of the passions or desires of sensate creatures. Being, as ultimate reality, is eternal and without the possibility of becoming other than what it is. Because the order of Being is at the same time the “sphere of speculative order” of the philosopher, then the philosopher does not err in his thinking, but understands the truth of reality perfectly and can reproduce that reality in his thinking. He alone is in a position to be able to order the life of man, because he, with his reason, stands in the light whereas others are always in the dark and do not see correctly. Because the order of reality is the order of the mind of the philosopher and none but the philosopher, others must be in subjection to his authority and power for their own good.

With Heraclitus we return to the East, for he was a descendant of the royal and priestly rulers of Ephesus, a city whose pre-eminence replaced that of Miletus after the Persians had destroyed it. As a member of a long-standing noble family Heraclitus was raised to see himself as morally and otherwise superior to those beneath his station, an outlook he apparently embraced without demur. By all accounts he was of a haughty nature and seems to have gone out of his way to display his contempt not only for the lower orders but for nearly the general run of mankind. That he was gifted intellectually only served to encourage

22. Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, p. 213.

his arrogance and condescension toward others and fuel his disdain for people who seemed to him like idiots. He especially hated the new democratic ideas that were spreading among the Greeks of his day, and considered the people stupid and incapable of running the affairs of government. Heraclitus withdrew from society into a world of purely intellectual interests. He left behind little written material, and what we have is not likely to encourage study, for Heraclitus had a reputation for obscurity. "He delighted in paradox and isolated aphorisms, couched in metaphorical or symbolic terms."<sup>23</sup> He was an odd-ball, to say the least.

Yet, while he viewed most everyone around him with cordial disdain and took no active interest in civic affairs, nevertheless Heraclitus was no recluse nor dispassionate proponent of ideas for their own sake. He was nothing more nor less than a *preacher* of truth, who wrote and spoke as a prophet, as one who had himself journeyed to the light of day and therefore deemed himself especially chosen to enlighten his fellow man. Heraclitus believed serenely in philosophy as the true path of salvation for man and society.

Heraclitus, in opposition to Parmenides, saw change as ultimate, that all things come into being and just as readily pass away and that this continuous process was the central law of reality. Heraclitus's main purpose, however, was to disclose the knowledge of this general law of the cosmos which produces change as the principal truth of all things. What ordering principle maintains the cosmos in the midst of seeming chaos and incessant change? In particular, how does man, who is born and dies, fit into the reason of things? Does the world have a purpose and does man play a central role in it?

Heraclitus, along with Parmenides, believed that there were two types of men: those who achieve understanding by recognizing and living in terms of a higher wisdom, and those who live only by what they experience and perceive moment by moment. For Heraclitus the issue of truth turned on the mean-

23. Guthrie, *The Earlier Presocratics*, p. 410.

ing of man and how he could achieve the status of the former. Man only becomes true man when he has *ascended* from the manifold of visible and tangible appearances of things to the invisible and intangible essence of the whole or One. In order to grasp the world process, he must rise beyond mere sensations to a new principle of order – the *logos*.<sup>24</sup> The inner principle of ultimate reality, which exists beyond the constant flux of outward change, and which governs the nature of all things in accordance with a hidden agenda, is to be found in something called the “world-order.”<sup>25</sup> The world-order is the driving force of change, the divine (i.e., “everlasting”) “fire,” from which through strife and confrontation the order or cosmos of the world is repeatedly achieved and guaranteed. Man is a participant in this process because he possesses in himself the nature of soul or reason as a spark of the world-order. When by means of great intellectual exertions he has thrown off all superfluities of body and matter and has ascended to the One he will then be able to live in terms of the higher reality of ordered life, this despite the impermanence of all material things.<sup>26</sup> Heraclitus taught that only that life is worth living in which man has *cultivated* the self and thereby become a part of the ordering power of Reason. That man will then be in a position to return to the world of mundane affairs in order to arrange everything in accordance with his superior insight.

Voegelin indicates what this will mean for Plato: “In Heraclitus the idea of an order of the soul begins to form which Plato unfolds into the perennial principle of political science that the right order of the soul through philosophy furnishes the standards for the right order of human society.”<sup>27</sup> But what was true of Heraclitus was equally true of all the Presocratics leading up to Plato. The idea of a standard of truth which the soul grasps by means of an innate and autonomous intellectual power became the fundamental basis upon which a new humanist order could

24. Kirk & Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, pp. 187, 188.

25. Kirk & Raven, p. 199.

26. Kirk & Raven, p. 207.

27. Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, p. 227.

be made possible. The mediator of that truth to society was to be none other than the philosopher who has with his thinking penetrated the mystery of nature and discovered the *logos* or reason of all reality. There could be no other *truth* available to mankind but that discovered and expounded by the philosopher. Man had achieved the chief place in the cosmos.

#### 4• Plato's Agenda

As it was said that all roads in the ancient world lead to Rome, so, too, in the realm of Greek thought all avenues lead to Plato. Plato is no mere contributor to the edifice of Greek ideas; he is the culmination of Greek thinking, the summation of all those who have preceded him. All the various strands of earlier ideas are woven together in his thinking; yet, at the same time, they are transformed by Plato into a tapestry that represents a final maturation of their point of view and a clearer indication of the inner humanism that Greek thinkers were striving to achieve. *Platonism* is the logical outworking of the philosophical ideal.

Plato, for example, was thoroughly in agreement with Milesian *naturalism* about the formation of the cosmos. The world, he too believed, was a natural order which had the basis of its existence and structure within itself. If he departed from them on account of their crude *materialism* it was only because he came to believe, from other sources, that nature as an ordered system was something more than mere matter. It was primarily *idea*, a product of mind or intellect. Not what was visible could be accounted nature, but only that which was invisible and comprehensible to reason could be called nature, for order did not derive from matter but was to be found in the *form* of material things. This Plato learned from the Pythagoreans and Parmenides who spoke of ultimate reality as lying beyond the appearance of things, a reality discovered only by abstracting from the world of matter. The mind or reason alone was able to penetrate to the real nature which lies obscured behind the outer physical image perceived by the senses. All truth was to be found

there and nowhere else. Only those who have pursued the way of philosophy would ever come to know the true reality of all things.

The preeminence of philosophical knowing over other types of knowing therefore also led to the belief that philosophers were superior to other men and should be responsible for ruling them for their own good and the good of society. While some thinkers seemed to withdraw from worldly affairs in order to engage in undistracted reflection, nearly all of them had nothing but contempt for the masses who spent their lives chasing after material comforts and pleasures, being aroused only by their passions and desires which led to continual disputes. They were constantly bestirred into factions, intrigues, wars, and jealous strife. Rather than being in control of themselves and living in harmony and peace in their communities, they were always quarreling and fighting. How could they possibly govern themselves lacking as they do a true knowledge of the nature of all things? Since only philosophers possessed such knowledge, it was only natural that they should be in charge of civic and social affairs. Plato acquired this notion that philosophers should rule in society primarily from Pythagoras who also maintained that philosophers should not be held accountable to the ruled. Their unquestioned grasp of the truth was enough, for true knowledge was necessarily shrouded from any but philosophers, it being too recondite for ordinary people.

Finally, Heraclitus taught that reality was a product of constant struggle, that, from the material standpoint, the world and man's experience was a flux, random and meaningless, a process of perpetual decay and degeneration. It was always a troubling thought to ancient Greeks to contemplate the idea of the triumph of chaos over order. The fact that all around us there is constant change, that man, in particular, is born, grows old, and dies would seem to indicate that chaos was at least equal, if not superior, to order. Nevertheless, Heraclitus believed that order stands preeminent over the seeming flux of all things for the reason that all change is determined by a law or principle which compels change to take place in such a way that order constantly

and eternally issues from it. There is a principle of order governing the flux. What is more, the philosopher can discover that law and employ it as an ordering principle for human affairs. Inspired by this, Plato confidently believed that, how ever bad or rotten society was in his day, it would nevertheless be possible to find the key to the salvation of society along lines that were more in tune with the law of ultimate reality and hence with perfect truth. In other words, Plato believed it possible to arrest change which to him meant corruption only and thereby realize the perfect (i.e., changeless or incorruptible) human society.<sup>28</sup>

Plato was clearly imbued with the ideas of earlier Greek thinkers. One other thinker, traditionally thought to be the most important of the influences that shaped Plato's agenda, was Socrates. Socrates represents a different current of thought, namely, that of moral reform. The issue was far from academic, for Socrates and Plato, his younger contemporary, lived in tumultuous times. The period saw the Greek city-states plunged into internecine war – the Peloponnesian War. Plato, especially, was deeply disturbed by the social upheaval and political instability that he came to witness in his native Athens as a result. He needed, like Homer, to be able to diagnose the causes of disorder and, if possible, to discover, a cure for the moral disease that he believed was the reason for the malady afflicting the society in which he lived. For Plato, philosophy took on an importance beyond the wish to understand the world as a kind of intellectual curiosity. Rather, philosophy was the key, the only possible means, to put the socially and morally fragmented humpty-dumpty back together again. As Plato expressed it in his *Republic*; “[u]nless political power and philosophy coincide ... there can be no end to political troubles...or even to human troubles in general...there is no other way for an individual or a community to achieve happiness.” (473d,e) Philosophy had immediate, practical consequences and an urgent task to perform. Plato saw the philosophical enterprise as having to do with the restoration

28. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. I, *The Spell of Plato*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 18–56.



of political order, as a message of salvation, through a well-regulated "love of wisdom."<sup>29</sup> This program of philosophy Plato received, in part, from Socrates.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand Socrates and his self-appointed *Socratic* mission unless we know something of the times in which he lived and the condition of the society (especially in his native Athens) of which he was a part. However, an adequate explanation is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that Socrates lived at a time when, as we said, Athenian society was experiencing turmoil. The politics of the city was controlled by the *demos*, ostensibly an elected body of citizens who were responsible for all decisions of government and policy. Rather than being under the absolute authority of one man, or group of men, the people themselves, by democratic means, decided upon everything that concerned the life and good of the *polis*. While this democratic ideal allowed the people a say in government, at the same time it opened the door to intense political rivalries between various ambitious individuals who wished to influence the direction of state and persuade the people that they could best lead them for their own good. Such rivalries gave rise to factions which, in order to achieve their aims, would often resort to almost any means available with little consideration for the moral consequences. Needless to say, the consequences were what we might expect, a breakdown of order and a struggle for power. In the minds of those who, like Socrates, saw the moral corruption to which *democracy* seemed to lead, this raised serious questions over whether or not some kind of reform was possible in order to *save* society. Would it be possible to discover a set of principles that would act as a standard of right and wrong? principles which were grounded in the nature of things and not the product of human and social convention? Or, was moral truth merely a matter of custom as the Sophists declared and, therefore, bound to the needs of the moment, being neither absolute nor permanent? In other words,

29. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. 3, *Plato and Aristotle*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 5

did men have no standards by which to live other than the standard of self-indulgence; and, if so, then how is it possible to escape the degeneration of social order and the collapse into chaos? How could men truly achieve the good for themselves if there was no agreement on what constituted the good, or if the good was merely what each decided for themselves? Would society simply become a struggle by one group to impose its will on others by force? These were the great moral dilemmas facing Socrates who believed himself especially called to disturb the complacency of his fellow Athenians and expose their peril should they fail to solve the problem of the moral relativism that was undermining the social fabric.

Socrates maintained that the problem of moral behavior was an intellectual one. He believed that men do not commit immoral acts because they want to, or because it is in their nature to do so. Rather, they act strictly from *ignorance* of what is truly for their own good. All men, he also believed, act for the purpose of some good they hope to gain by so acting. The problem is that what men usually think is for their own good actually turns out to be bad. This is especially true in regard to injustices which their actions produce in society. If men's actions promote injustices, it is because they do not clearly know what is a just act. For many people, justice meant getting whatever you wanted regardless of the consequences. Injustice, then, is being deprived of what you think is your due. Consequently, justice is not about motives or character, but only about achieving what one wants. But Socrates taught that justice is not about the fulfillment of momentary desires, but has to do primarily with what we are by nature. If men are properly taught justice as prescribed by natural order, they will become just in their natures, and, consequently, will never commit unjust acts. For Socrates the matter was clear-cut; to be just is to do what is just. The solution to the ills of society depended upon all men acquiring knowledge of the moral good, for those who know the good would always do the good. Socrates was a great optimist in the matter of moral reform. Education, a basic premise which he inherited from his predecessors, was the great resolution to the regeneration of

men and societies afflicted with moral corruption.

Here we encounter something called the "Socratic problem." Socrates believed that moral enlightenment was the only means to the moral reform of society. Socrates also believed that each man possessed in his own rational soul the singular source of enlightening power. "Each man is to live a rationally ordered life, to deliberate and decide and act according to the dictates of his decisions."<sup>30</sup> None could compel another to accept what was not at all acceptable to his own autonomous rationality. To achieve this aim, it was necessary, therefore, to use a special kind of persuasion, called *elenchos*, the art of refutation. Socrates would enter into a dialogue or verbal argument with any who showed a willingness to put his convictions on any ethical matter to the test. Socrates had little doubt that his method of discussing and analyzing all types of thinking would necessarily act as an effective means of teaching the people to think for themselves. When they learn to do so, they shall undoubtedly act in accordance with their true good rather than the false good by which they used to behave before they had, with Socrates' assistance, undergone a process of enlightenment. Everything depended upon getting the people to turn to their innate rationality and, by this inner light, achieve the moral knowledge that will then produce good moral actions. Socrates believed it not only possible but necessary for *all* men to acquire enlightenment, for all men have the same rational nature.

Socrates believed that his task was to enable his fellow Athenians "to waken...to the importance of caring for their souls, or caring for virtue."<sup>31</sup> Each individual must realize the need to engage in a process of self-criticism as the sole means by which to discover those moral principles that will govern their lives, and would do so only under the guidance of one whose own soul had already been *nobly* formed, that is, by Socrates himself. Socrates would act as midwife to those who possessed

30. George Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd), p. 31

31. Klosko, p. 166.

the spark of truth in their own souls, but which was smothered by the prejudices of the *demos*, the people. He would proceed by means of a program of one-on-one, for Socrates does not believe it possible to persuade the people *en masse*. Thus, he neither addresses the people as a whole nor expresses the belief that moral reform can be achieved by reforming society first, in other words, by the enactment of political programs to compel the people to live in accordance with the moral good. This is chiefly why Plato presents Socrates in the dialogue format; he meant to show how Socrates believed philosophy was to be bred in noble souls. One noble soul, by means of the dialogue format, would guide the next to an understanding of philosophical truth. It takes one conversion at a time, for the discovery of moral knowledge was neither simple nor easily gained.

Would it be possible to carry out such a task given the strong prejudices of the people? Is it conceivable that each individual could be freed from the false opinions that shaped the masses as a whole given the assumption that the people were incapable of knowing what was truly good for themselves? Was Socrates, perhaps, not a little too optimistic that he could achieve his goal by addressing each person individually? Plato, for one, did not share Socrates' optimism when it came to converting *all* the people. Of course, he did believe along with Socrates that reason could achieve the dominant rule in man and thus enable him to control his appetites. But it was too much to expect that everyone could reach it. Furthermore, Plato was too class-conscious to believe that each individual possessed an equal spark of true knowledge within his own soul. Rather, he believed that "the most exalted truths are accessible to man, but only to the highly privileged few. Since only the philosopher can reach such heights, the many must be enslaved to the few if they are to partake at all of divine intelligence."<sup>32</sup> The Socratic ideal that each individual must care for his own soul must be discarded. In its place Plato erects a state-system in which a few carefully bred and nurtured souls will be put in charge of all that concerns man's

32. Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*, p. 166.

relationship to his fellow man. As Klosko explains:

While Socrates envisioned a collectivity of free, autonomous souls, with each individual seeking for himself the knowledge that is virtue, Plato sees a tightly controlled city of people having virtue imposed upon them from without. In the ideal state, only philosophers possess moral autonomy, and even in their case this is possible only because they too are subjected to rigorous conditioning in their youths.<sup>33</sup>

Plato's agenda entailed the belief in philosophy as the intellectual tool by which an elite few will be trained to rule absolutely over the ignorant many for the presumed good of social order. Philosopher-rulers will have correct moral knowledge because they, and they alone, will see its "permanent and unvarying nature." (479e) "[G]iven that philosophers are those who are capable of apprehending that which is permanent and unvarying, while those who can't, those who wander erratically in the midst of plurality and variety, are not lovers of knowledge, which set of people ought to be rulers of a community?" (484b) For Plato the answer was only too obvious. Philosophers must rule, and the people must be ruled. Sometimes Plato even goes so far as to call the latter *slaves* of the philosopher-rulers. Unless philosophers rule there will be no end to difficulties, to corruption and disorder. Philosophy alone can insure the *salvation* of man and society. Reason in those who are properly educated and taught *scientific* knowledge of the *whole* of reality (475b) will be in a better position to erect order and prevent chaos.

With Plato "the Greek legacy" at last comes into its own. Plato severed the last links to the *gods*, that is, to any source of order for man and society other than man's inherent rational powers. At the same time, he placed man and society in subservience to new gods, namely, to the scientifically or philosophically bred elites who, because they possessed true knowledge of ultimate reality, that is, the *idea* or *form* which lies hidden behind all

33. Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*, p. 129.

that appears, must be put in charge of creating the utopian conditions which no chaos or corruption could destroy. Presumably, Plato had great faith that his philosopher-rulers, who grasp the invariable truth, would then impose that *truth* on the world and man with an interest in the Good for its own sake and not for reasons of personal gain. It is, however, an optimism no less misplaced than that of Socrates, yet this ideal of the rule of reason by means of specially chosen and cultivated agents would take deep roots in the consciousness of Western men. For many in Western history *reason-as-power* would return again and again to inspire confidence and shape the processes of culture.

Unquestionably some will strenuously object to the notion that the culmination of the Greek legacy is reached with Plato. After all, what about Aristotle? What is more, who could ignore the later developments of Stoicism, Epicureanism, and finally, Neoplatonism? There is, to be sure, more to the Greek legacy than Plato. However, while major differences crop up in philosophical detail between Plato and, especially, Aristotle, it is not possible to assert that a fundamental distinction exists in the philosophical ideal itself. Aristotle, it is true, was dissatisfied with problems in Plato's thinking, but he does not differ with him on the basic premise that philosophy or science should be the source of order for man and his world. Aristotle would in time distinguish between the theoretician and the politician, the thinker and the actor, but he would not question the need of the latter to be governed by the ideas of the former. For both Plato and Aristotle the world must be constructed by the intellect of man if it is to be suitable for the life of man. Other *divinities* are relegated to the world of conceptual necessity. That is, any *god*, if he exists, merely provides a theoretical starting-place in the scheme of causal origins of natural order. But such a god is a mere limiting concept, needed only to explain the necessary starting-point. After that, however, the intellect of man takes over and renders reality intelligible by the powers of abstracted ideas. For all Greek thinkers the speculative order was the order of reality and vice versa, a fact that would prove to be of no small consequence to the further unfolding of Western civilization.

*Part II - Medieval Man*  
*“The Grand Synthesis”*





### 3 • *The Monastic Retreat* *The Ascetic Ideal*

In a study of the main ideals of Western civilization, the single most important factor to be observed in Late Antiquity is “the rise of Christianity.”<sup>1</sup> One might even argue that until the triumph of Christianity over its pagan rivals was complete, Western civilization does not emerge in any true sense. This chapter examines the nature of the Christianity that developed and which came, in so remarkably short a span of time, to dominate the ethos of Western Society, from Emperor to slave. It was not until the fourteenth century Renaissance that a new *humanistic* ethos arose and struggled to usurp the dominance of Christianity as the prevailing religion of Western man.

Christianity was born into a society and culture that was thoroughly in the grip of the ideals of Classical Man. If we consider the account given in Acts 1:15 of the believers gathered together with the disciples shortly after the Ascension, we are amazed to find that from the core number of about 120 persons huddled together in fear of the Jewish authorities the Church grew with such rapidity, not only in numbers but in social influence, that by the fourth century a succession of Roman Emperors (with the exception of Julian the Apostate, 361–363 AD) appeared who claimed, at least nominally, to be Christians. While it is necessary to begin with the New Testament narrative in order to understand the origins of the Church and the first spread of Christianity, we do not have a clear picture of the type of Christianity that came to dominate the West for over a millennium until evidence emerges in the historical record of the second century AD. This account may be discovered and pieced together principally from the sub-apostolic literature as well as

1. The most extensive English language account can be found in W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). A shorter, but no less valuable, version is his *The Early Church*, (Phil.: Fortress Press, 1982).

from the works of certain noteworthy authors, e.g., Polycarp, Ignatius, Justin and Irenaeus, and especially the two Alexandrines, Clement and Origen. The purpose of their writings was to defend Christianity against attacks from Jews and pagans and to provide the faithful with useful arguments in the face of what proved to be a far greater threat to Christianity than the persecuting opposition of Jews or Romans, namely, the manifold heresies of Gnosticism.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, Christianity did not achieve success without a struggle against attempts to eliminate it from without and to subvert it from within. Christianity did not arise merely as one religion of man in a world immersed in religious movements and steeped in a variety of cultic attachments. It came as a doctrine, as the certainty of Truth – a certainty founded upon Divine revelation and the authority of Scripture – as it pertained to God, man, the world, sin and redemption. It necessarily opposed each and every belief and concomitant life-style as these were traceable to the superstitions of ancient man and practiced everywhere by pagans. By definition, a religion of Truth is uncompromising. It cannot tolerate different religious viewpoints. Truth is one and indivisible, and those who are convinced must persuade others as well. Christianity was bound to conflict with what on its terms were false religions and beliefs.

At the same time, it is of overwhelming importance to recognize that Christianity's eventual triumph over the ancient pagan world was tragically undermined by an opposing development, the incursion into the life of Christianity of a deeply rooted pagan outlook that took hold as Monasticism. Far from being a fringe movement attached to Christian soil, Monasticism arose as the principal expression of Christian culture and dominated its civilizational agenda throughout the period of its predominance in the West. In this respect a false Christianity

2. In the 2nd Cent. AD Gnosticism, as Kurt Rudolph has mentioned, was already turning out a vast literature and gaining adherents over wide areas of the eastern Roman Empire. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature & History of Gnosticism*, trans. and edited by Robert McLachlan Wilson, (Harper: San Francisco, 1987), p. 25.

appeared along side true Christianity, the two virtually indistinguishable for centuries. Not until the Reformation of the sixteenth century did a genuine Biblical Christianity finally begin to emerge from the baleful influence of so deep-seated a corruption of its true nature.

What Monasticism represented it is possible to recite; why it triumphed over Christianity at the same time that Christianity gained victory over ancient paganism it is difficult, if not impossible, to explain. But if we hope to understand what came to have decisive significance for Western civilization we cannot leave Monastic *Christianity* out of account or fail to provide some possible explanation of its advancement. We begin by recalling the essential vision of the Classical heritage, for, as we said, Christianity entered the world at the time when that heritage had reached its zenith.

*1> Christianity and the World of Late Antiquity*

Edward Gibbon, that connoisseur of prolixity and style, enthused:

If a man were to fix the period in history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian [96 AD] to the accession of Commodus [180 AD]. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

He believed the Roman empire at this moment in its history had reached the culmination of its greatness, that it is obvious at least to us rationally enlightened modern men that no greater condition of human goodness and beneficence was to be

3. Edward Gibbon, *The History of The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire*, Vol. I, ed. J.B. Bury, (New York: The Heritage Press, 1946) p. 61.

found in the history of mankind than in that time of Rome's climax. Were that true, we ought to ponder what enormous transformations occurred in Rome and in the rationale undergirding its institutions, following this pinnacle century, built as they had been on the Classical heritage, that two centuries later (in the late summer of 390) a Christian bishop, Ambrose, could demand of an emperor, Theodosius, that he repent publicly in accordance with Christian moral precepts for malevolent deeds which he, as supreme power and sole authority, had ordered carried out. Clearly a significant change had come about in Western society and in the concept of Rome that still stood at the heart of its vision, not so much in the external nature of things as in the realm of ideals and values. As Frend points out, "A vital principle of Western society had... been established. A Christian moral order stood above the will of the ruler or any reason of state."<sup>4</sup> Henceforth an authority higher than the will of the emperor commanded submission and obedience. The elevation of a new Divine authority over *all* earthly power removed the last vestiges of *divinity* associated with Caesar. The idea *Princeps legibus solutus est*, that the ruler is above the law, was confronted not for the last time. Christianity, perhaps, made no greater contribution to the transformation of the ancient Classical world than this.

But in the second century AD Rome was still viewed as the hope of the world, still believed by the vast majority of her subjects to be the salvation of man from chaos and disorder. Her emperors were venerated as the bringers of social peace and economic prosperity, the protectors against sub-human barbarians lurking with savage designs just beyond the *limes*. Divine Rome was the pride and longing of thousands from Spain to Syria, from Gaul to Africa. In the second century, "There was no widespread discontent in the empire that would lead to a questioning of the benefits derived from traditional gods and ways of life."<sup>5</sup> Gibbon's evaluation of this century, it would seem, was not altogether fanciful. But historical changes were soon to disturb the

4. W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 625.

5. Frend, p. 167.

tranquility of *Roma Aeterna* and render hollow the Classical ideal that lay at its root.

Christianity entered the world at precisely that moment when Augustus had established and secured the principle of "Caesarism."<sup>6</sup> Caesarism was the fulfillment in Roman garb of the Classical heritage, which derived from the Greeks. As Cochrane noted, "for centuries... unique associations were to cling to the reign of Augustus as the claim of a new and better epoch for humanity."<sup>7</sup> Augustus had triumphed over the forces of social and civil disorder; he had re-established Rome on the principle of public power over the divisive private powers of parties and factions that were the principal sources of the Civil Wars of the first century BC. The power of the previously dominant noble *gens* (family/clans) gave way to the power of monarchy. In truth, the power of one party destroyed all competing parties for control of the public *auctoritas*. It was the party of Caesar, or the party of the *people*, that broke the power of the aristocrats.<sup>8</sup>

Every revolution demands legitimation, requires a basis on which it can be justified. Since order was religiously defined in the ancient world, any change of order must be vindicated by an appeal to religion. The new Caesarism sought to explain itself as the necessary outworking of the religious and philosophical principles inherent in Greco-Roman ideals. That system of thought conceived of order as the descent and association of the gods with man through some particular human agency. Indeed, the ancients had ever longed for the appearance of a god in human form. "For," as Stauffer explained, "where the deity moves as a man among men, the dream of the ages is fulfilled, the pain of

6. No better discussion on this subject is available than in Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957). "Caesarism" is dealt with in the first three chapters.

7. Cochrane, p. 27.

8. The best account is to be found in Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). See, also, Lily Ross Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

the world is scattered, and there is heaven on earth.”<sup>9</sup> It was natural, then, to see in Caesarism the principle of divinity at work in the world as the final hope for mankind.

What Caesarism inherited from the Classical world of ideas was the belief in salvation through politics, that the rightly ordered state offered the embodiment of the defeat of the forces of chaos and the permanent realization of order and prosperity. It was the highest form of salvation envisioned by ancient man, for beyond this life nothing remained but the everlasting darkness of the Stygian gloom. Besides, this life, too, was sufficiently threatened with dissolution and the forces of anarchy. Classicism, as a product of the distillation of centuries of Greek thought passed on to Rome, was a Herculean effort “to rescue mankind from the life and mentality of the jungle, and to secure for him the possibility of the good life...it was envisaged as a struggle for civilization against barbarism and superstition.”<sup>10</sup> For the Greeks this conception was first associated with the polis, the city-state. However, when it was dealt a severe blow in the crisis of the Peloponnesian War and finally demolished when the might of the kingdom of Macedon subjected the independent city-states of Greece to its absolute power, the concept in this form perished. All the same, belief in the triumph of civilization as conceived by the Greeks persisted and, in time, was transferred to the emerging concept of the *res publica* of Rome. Here, at last, was the hope of political salvation.

Caesarism sought justification, then, in the older religious conception of *Roma Aeterna*, a concept of social justice, peace, and harmony. Its religious ideal was “that of an order which professed to satisfy the permanent and essential requirements of human nature...”<sup>11</sup> It assumed, of course, that a correct insight into the “essential requirements of human nature” was clearly obtainable. It was not sheer power that Caesarism stood for, but a power bent to the service of order, justice, and right living.

9. Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, trans. by K. and R. Gregor Smith, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), p. 36.

10. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, p. 160.

11. Cochrane, p. 74.

Caesarism meant power to apply superior *divine* wisdom to a total civilizational project. Caesar, so it was thought, represented the possession of such knowledge and capability. And as *Roma Aeterna* stood for the divine embodiment of law and order so, beginning with Augustus, “law was to be the gift of the Caesars to the world.”<sup>12</sup>

The idea of *Roma Aeterna* was deeply indebted to the “vision of Hellas,” a belief in “the excellence of man as man.”<sup>13</sup> The latter affirmed the possibility of the realization of the good life by virtue of capacities intrinsic to human nature. Human nature was viewed as being fully in accord with a cosmic principle of order and goodness, and needed only to be rationally internalized in order for man to live well. To discover the *Reason* or *Mind* of that order was the essential commitment of the Greek spirit of inquiry. Plato and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Aristotle confidently believed that the highest application of that principle was made possible in civic association. Man was a *political animal*, and could only hope to realize the essence of what it means to be human in political society. The *city* alone held out the hope of escape from the dark forces of chaos and flux.

There was, however, a disturbing dimension to Classicism that tended to upset the placid confidence it had in the esteemed capability of the cultivated *virtue* of man. It was the problem of Fortune or Fate. Here was a power in the cosmos to which even the gods were subject. It could, and often did, nullify virtue and reduce order to chaos, war, revolution, and social upheaval. It might, at times, support the cause of virtue, but it might equally counteract it and bring it to naught. Men would sometimes feel powerless and helpless in the face of overwhelming disasters of nature, and in civil affairs, instead of a man close to the gods sitting on the throne, Fortune or Fate might cast up one who was more like a devil. To place hope in human saviors, as Caesarism came to represent, could easily lead to disappointment. And the Caesars themselves, even if they were relatively benign, could

12. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, p. 23.

13. Cochrane, p. 75.

easily lead people to expect results which, because Fate intervened, they could not accomplish. If the belief was firmly maintained that Caesarism would defeat the hidden power of Fate in the cosmos, then the cure could sometimes be worse than the disease. What Caesarism came to mean was the tyranny of the *political* over the whole of life. Everything was subject directly to Caesar who possessed ultimate power to grant or withhold benefits as he wished. In the end it led to what Cochrane has described as "the tragedy of the Caesars." "It was, in a word, the tragedy of men who, being required to play gods, descended to that of beasts."<sup>14</sup> When virtue fails or is thwarted all that remains is raw power. Large numbers of people, at the same time they tenaciously clung to the ideal of Rome, increasingly sought a refuge from the grim realities of its outworking in history. To find escape, they turned to the mystery religions and orientalism.

Mystery cults were nothing new in the Classical context. They had existed for centuries. Virtually all were derivations of one sort or another from ancient chthonic religion, or religion of the cycle of life and death, and fertility.<sup>15</sup> The Olympian religion associated with the concept of the polis and of the rational ordering of life according to *nomos* did not completely eliminate the powerful attraction of these earlier mystical attachments. A significant expansion of their influence occurred following the conquests of Alexander the Great (334–323 BC) which effected the demise of the city-state and ushered in the Hellenistic kingdoms. The movement of Greeks into the east during this period brought about a closer contact with oriental influences and hence a major revival of mystery cults.

The mystery religions offered a new form of personal devotion and an immediate sense of the divine which helped to satisfy a craving for purpose and destiny in a world that for many could not be achieved by mere *political* salvation. Thus, beginning in the time of the Hellenistic kingdoms, but not reaching a

14. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, p. 129.

15. See, e.g., Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1987).



peak until the vast conquests of Rome, the mystery religions came to mean a broad-based rebellion against salvation by means of political power and order. What the orient contributed to this growing counter-culture was an anthropological and cosmical dualism whereby a retreat from the total realm of the material in all its associations and a complete absorption in the domain of spirit took hold as the only means to escape from what was regarded as confinement in a world of evil and misery.<sup>16</sup> But every counter-culture offers itself as a culture and is presented with a philosophical justification. The term that best describes this development is *gnosis* or what we have learned to speak of as Gnosticism. Far from appearing as one more idealism among many, Gnosticism developed as a sub-culture, in time extensive enough to challenge, if not eventually to displace, the political culture of Greco-Rome. For vast numbers in the east it was the very air they breathed. It was in this cultural world that Christianity first made its appearance. And this cultural world seeped into Christianity! This influence needs to be kept in mind as we proceed to examine the nature of Monasticism in the early Church, for Monasticism was deeply infected with the dualistic ideology so culturally pervasive in the centuries of its emergence and growth. A cultural cancer on the organ of the Classical world provided the basis of Monasticism.

## 2> *Early Monasticism*

Although histories have been written about Monasticism and the personalities behind its advance, there really is no one cause or inventor of Monasticism. It is one of those murky developments that seems suddenly to appear after a previous, largely hidden, period of gestation. It is an already existing attitude waiting for some particular character to provide it with notoriety. That person would appear to be Anthony, an Egyptian who made the name of *hermit* a Christian badge of honor.

16. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis*, p. 283.

Anthony (251–356 AD), a Coptic Christian, born into a wealthy family of Christian farmers in upper Egypt, not far from Memphis, has been called the first of the *Desert Fathers*. It seems that both his parents died around 270, leaving Anthony the heir to a prosperous estate. Upon hearing a sermon one Sunday on the text of Matt. 19:21 – “Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and come follow me and you will have treasure in heaven” – Anthony immediately complied. He sold the lot, placed his sister in some sort of nunnery, and headed straight into the inhospitable desert to practice until his dying day the most abstemious asceticism imaginable. We can scarcely conjecture why Anthony thought it necessary, in order *to follow* the Lord’s injunction, to live in solitary confinement and to deprive his body of the least possible comfort, unless we realize that a whole attitude about the realm of matter and the flesh had long been asserted by the Church. As Peter Brown has observed: “Anthony and the monks of the fourth century inherited a revolution; they did not initiate one.”<sup>17</sup>

The Church had been encouraging the notion that the body and everything associated with it was evil and a hindrance to *realized* perfection (not simply *positional* perfection in Christ) without which it was impossible to get into heaven. This fact is more easily understood when we consider that Anthony was merely the first in what was to become a virtual flood of followers. Throughout the next few centuries thousands turned to the harsh asceticism of Monasticism in order to escape every aspect of life in society and to retreat into a self-absorption of heroic deprivation and denial. As the vast majority of this army of hermits and monks were of similar social circumstances to Anthony, it is inaccurate to see in this movement a protest of the poor and down-trodden, the dregs of society, against a social system that had excluded or oppressed them.<sup>18</sup> It was a freely chosen way of life. Most came from well-off circumstances and turned in delib-

17. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 208.

erate rejection from anything having to do with life in this world. What Anthony and those who emulated his way of life initiated can be called the first *liberation* movement in Christendom. "To enter the Desert" as Robert Markus comments, "was to assert one's freedom to extricate oneself from the suffocating bonds of that society, from the claims of property relationships, of power and domination, of marriage and family, and to re-create a life of primal freedom, whether in solitude or in an alternative and freely chosen social grouping."<sup>19</sup> Far from being a Biblical attitude this was a humanistic gospel of salvation by meritorious accomplishment and an assertion of a religion of self-will in opposition to the grace of God. At the same time, it evidenced a perverse ingratitude toward the Creator and Lord of all life, including that of the body.

Anthony's brand of *eremitic* asceticism conflicted with the idea of the Church as a community, a people gathered together to form the basis of a new humanity. This contradiction did not engender misgivings about Monasticism *per se*; others simply conceived it in terms of organized social groups. A second type of Egyptian Monasticism, styled *cenobitic*, emerged under the influence of one Pachomius (290–345 AD). With him "we may discern the beginnings of a more ordered community asceticism which was to extend its influence throughout the Greek world, and ultimately provide a model for monasteries in the West."<sup>20</sup> Pachomian monasteries sprang up throughout Egypt and in Palestine and attracted thousands of devotees. The ideal continued to be one of withdrawal from life in society, but now to form a society apart based upon iron discipline and organized regimentation. There was at least some recognition that Christians had a reason for their existence beyond mere self-flagellation. In these communities some obligations were required in the way of work.

18. "...the founders of the monastic movement and their recruits were not oppressed peasants." Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1971), p. 101.

19. Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 165.

20. Frend, *The Early Church*, p. 192.

But Monasticism, by its very nature, conceived of work as a distraction from a *higher* calling. Not for the last time in history would toil be viewed as an obstacle to piety and inner fulfillment. About the only *work* most of these monks cherished was hours spent in prayer, rote memorization of Scripture, and days and nights of rigid fasting from food and sleep.

Completely independent of Egyptian Monasticism there sprang up in Syria and its environs the most virulent strain of Monastic asceticism. In Syria, a crossroads of east and west, the dualistic temper reached a peak of expression. In Syria were also to be found the worst excesses of anarchic rebellion against all earthly institutions and societal forms, in which individuals went to great lengths to display utter contempt of normality. It was Syria that would produce the likes of Simeon Stylites, men with a penchant for exhibition and studied theatrics. But precisely because Syrian Monasticism had reached such outlandish proportions was it taken with utter seriousness by many in society. For how could such persons not possess great powers for man's benefit who possessed such power over themselves? Men capable of such feats as sitting on pillars for decades must, indeed, be in contact with heavenly powers. Might not one beseech them for intercession with such forces on behalf of more down-to-earth humans? In Syria Monasticism produced the concept of the *holy man*, a man to be reckoned with, a man capable of bringing upon the surrounding communities, and on the great cities, blessings or curses. Superstition and divination continued to be practiced in the name of Christianity. Brown summarizes these: "Syria was the great province of ascetic stars... Egypt was the cradle of monasticism... the holy men who minted the ideal of the saint in society came from Syria, and, later, from Asia Minor and Palestine – not from Egypt... the holy man in Egypt did not impinge on society around him in the same way as in other provinces."<sup>21</sup>

A third form of Monasticism has been associated with Asia

21. Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 109.

Minor and the name of Basil the Great (c. 330–379 AD). It has often been said that it was Basil, his brother Gregory of Nyssa and their close friend Gregory of Nazianzus – the Cappadocian Fathers – who were responsible for laying the foundations of Byzantine or Eastern Orthodox Christianity. It was certainly these three who, because they all were steeped in Classical culture (graduates, we might say, of the university of Athens!), helped to produce that combination of classical learning and Christianity which allegedly combined piety with intellectual rigor to foster that ideal which came to be known as the *contemplative* life. They were not, of course, the first to encourage this sort of development – the Alexandrines, Clement and Origen, had already shown the way. But under Basil's influence this notion of a *philosophical* Christianity was introduced into the Monastic context. For, as Frend has observed, with Basil, "the ideal of the hermit was replaced by that of the Christian-Platonist spiritual brotherhood."<sup>22</sup> His purpose, apparently, was to combine asceticism with philosophical reflection and to erect Monastic communities along such lines. Basil, moreover, was among the first to bring order, method, and purpose into Monasticism; it was primarily his legacy that was carried over into the West. A Benedictine long before Benedict, he organized Monastic life along societal lines in accordance with a *rule*. Those who entered must submit to the rules and live as they prescribed. The times of the day were arranged for varying activities, some for work, some for prayer, some for study of Scripture, but also for the Classical authors. Moreover, Basilian monks were not to be so self-absorbed and withdrawn that they engaged in no forms of service to the community. To prevent this Basil established monasteries in towns and cities as well as in the country. His monks were not to despise the institutional Church, but to promote it and offer dedicated service to those who were compelled to live in ordinary society.

Basil's system might appear to be a considerable improvement over the morbid strains of Monasticism that were associ-

22. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 631.

ated with Egypt and Syria. In fact, the combination of Classical culture with Christianity had the effect of subordinating Christianity to Classical culture, of making Christianity merely the addendum of *faith* to the *reason* of things as determined by non-Christian man. Further, the establishment or the institutionalizing of Monasticism in accordance with rules devised by man and with the intention to produce holiness, when combined with clericalism and ecclesiastical hierarchicalism, eventually destroyed the authority of *Sola Scriptura* and reduced genuine faith to the customs and commands of human agents and institutional prescriptions.

We have no idea how extensively Monasticism was practiced; it certainly was not the whole of Christianity during the first few centuries. But it was unsurpassed in influence as the ideal Christian life. While other Monastic traditions were to evolve in the course of Western history, the core of its concept and practice was already fully determined by the fourth century.

### *3> Essential Traits and Characteristics of Monasticism*

In the growth of the Monastic concept three features stand out with peculiar prominence: (a) Monasticism as ethical martyrdom; (b) the cult of virginity; and (c) the cult of the holy man with power to work miracles.

Among the essential contributions of Monasticism to Christianity as it arose in the West, and as in other contexts is still influential in the present day, was the unbiblical assumption of two types of Christian faith and ethic: one for *higher* Christians, and one for *average* Christians. Monasticism, of course, meant to follow the stricter pathway of *superior* sanctity, whereas *ordinary* Christians, those who had not the faith to renounce all worldly associations of family, work, property relationships and general mundane affairs, must be content to live in terms of a *lesser* holiness. This whole concept developed in the wake of the legitimization of Christianity under Constantine in 313 AD. A Church that was granted a relative peace with the pagan world of persecuting

opposition longed for the good old days of the martyrs when a forced absorption in the *Militia Christi* ideal fostered a purer devotion to heavenly life and a willingness to let go of this world's goods. "With the ending of the age of persecution," as Markus points out, "monasticism came to absorb the ideal of the martyr. Like the martyr, the monk freed himself from the world for God and found the fullness of freedom in his death."<sup>23</sup> Not for the last time would the Church set its sights by the dead hand of the past rather than march forward with a Biblical agenda for the future. But, then, the Church under the influence of Monasticism was incapable of shaking off the pagan conceptions that dominated it. Like Classical man Monasticism shared a hankering for a golden era of heroes, for, as Markus also observes, "the age of the martyrs retained something of the flavour of a heroic age...."<sup>24</sup> The concept of the hero easily supported the ideal of perfection that Monasticism sought to achieve. Thus, "the martyr was the human image of perfection, a model to follow. To be persecuted for the Lord's sake was the hall-mark of the true Christian."<sup>25</sup> The accomplishment of great feats of self-immolation was the core ideal of sainthood. In the eyes of later Christians "martyrs were idealized as athletes and prizefighters in a supernatural combat."<sup>26</sup> Here were super saints indeed! What champions of spiritual warfare against this world and all its evil associations! "The martyr's rewards were believed to exceed those of any other Christian overachiever. His death effaced all sin after baptism; pure and spotless, he went straight to heaven."<sup>27</sup> The problem for Monasticism was how to emulate this behavior and so achieve the same outcome. It would be accomplished by means of a similar, though bloodless, endeavor – by *ethical* martyrdom. "The emotional energies previously absorbed by the duty to rise to the demands made on a perse-

23. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, p. 71.

24. Markus, p. 24.

25. Markus, p. 92.

26. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1986), p. 436.

27. Fox, p. 435.

cuted Church were largely re-directed towards disciplined ascetic living.”<sup>28</sup> The mantle of the martyr was assumed by the monk – the saint as hero.

To practice *ethical martyrdom* required an intense commitment to depriving the body of each and every form of sensual gratification and denying it the urges which it insistently demanded whether these were conceived as legitimate or not. Naturally, the most persistent and vehement of the body’s passions was to be found in the dimension of sexuality. Here was an impulse of the flesh that must be overcome at all cost. The struggle between spirit and matter reached its quintessence at precisely this point. Nothing represented for the seeker after *higher* sainthood the enemy of the body quite so unmistakably as the sexual impulse. The cult of the martyr-hero was given added impetus by the cult of virginity.

The Monastic mindset could conceive of no place in God’s purpose for the body, except to view it as a form of punishment for man’s sin. Man’s true destiny was heaven, there to live as angels do in complete perfection of bodiless existence. Here on earth his calling was to be saved from the body and all its associations. To be saved from sin meant the same as to be saved from the body. If anything gave prominence to the body, if any part of man could divert his attention from his true destiny, nothing did so with greater tenacity than the sexual impulse. The Monastic ideal called for resistance to sex as a vulgar and ignoble desire and the suppression of this normal feature of human nature.

Sex, of course, is a human desire that, like any other, is susceptible of moral abuse and perversion. The Biblical view was, and is, that God created man, male and female (Gen. 1:27), that man was given a sexual nature at the very beginning. Moreover, to satisfy properly the desire that accompanied that nature God instituted marriage (Gen. 2:20–25), the bonding of man and wife. All this is mentioned in Scripture as having been done *before* any sin entered into man’s experience. It is only when sin entered the world that the sexual impulse took on the character-

28. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, p. 70.



istic of a *lust* which man would satisfy as he pleased and in whatever circumstance he saw fit. Instead of defending and promoting a Biblical view, Monasticism simply stood in the grip of a profoundly pagan conception that insisted on a sharp dualism of matter and spirit; as matter was the source of evil, so escape to the realm of spirit meant true salvation.

The concept of virginity as a higher spiritual and ethical ideal is not easy to trace historically. Early in the post-apostolic period marriage was not thought to be alien to the Christian life, but decent, honorable and acceptable. It had been the purpose of the early Church to insist on decorum and orderliness in the conduct of man's life here on earth, to restrain his passions and lusts as is proper for Godliness and holiness. The marriage state took on the added dimension of bringing that most unruly passion of all into control and subjection to the will of God. Indeed, marriage was the only legitimate outlet for the sexual urge and not just for procreation or the producing of children. However, it very quickly developed that sex even within marriage was considered "to be a clear second best to no sex at all."<sup>29</sup> The married state came to be viewed as second-rate holiness. Couples were urged, and numerous spouses took it upon themselves, to practice sexual abstinence within marriage. In the second century a widespread consensus arose which spoke vociferously against marriage and idealized the virginal state. It was even suggested that married couples could, by giving up sex within marriage, return to the purity of virginity. At this time the Church also began to teach that second marriages, after the death of one of the spouses, ought not to be contracted. They were positively forbidden for the clergy (and soon first marriages as well). This had the effect of creating a large number of widows who, unless they were wealthy, became wards of the Church. If they were wealthy they became the object of solicitation by bishops and clerics who hoped to entice their wealth for the Church. "By idealizing virginity and frowning on second marriage, the Church was to become a force without equal in the race for inherit-

29. Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 355.

ance.”<sup>30</sup> The family, it would seem, as a covenant institution in God’s purpose had little place in the thinking of many in the Church, nor was promotion of that institution in accordance with Biblical directives seen as a feature of genuine holiness.

By the end of the second century there was little concern to distinguish between sexual promiscuity and proper conjugal sex. For those who adopted monasticism, the one was no more acceptable than the other. Origen (186–253/4 AD), clearly the greatest speculative mind whose theology was to dominate the Church’s thinking for the next two centuries, simply looked at the sexual nature of men and women as if it had no bearing upon human personality, as if in the present it simply did not matter and could therefore be dispensed with. He shrank from the very concept of gender in man. However, for Origen, to reject sexuality meant far more than simply suppressing the sexual nature. Rather, it meant the reassertion of a primal freedom so basic as to dissolve all distinctions of bodily existence. There was apparently nothing normal in sex whatever, not even procreation. Body gender represented an intrusion from an alien sphere. Sensual experiences of this sort, or of any sort for that matter, were destructive of true human personality, whose delights and pleasures exist in another world. Virginity alone could reunite man with his true personality, it was the original link between heaven and earth.<sup>31</sup> Origen’s legacy to Monasticism is profound.

The third essential characteristic of the culture of Monasticism that left its imprint deeply etched in Western Christianity was that of the monk as *holy man*. Although we have touched on this already, a few comments are added to fill in the main features of this aspect of the Monastic ideal.

As mentioned, the idea of the monk as holy man originated principally in the Syrian context, but eventually spread beyond merely local manifestations. Basically, the idea arose concurrently that the monk besides having acquired remarkable freedom from the contamination of the realm of matter and having

30. Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 310.

31. Brown, *The Body and Society*, pp. 171–175.

the characteristics of an ascetic overachiever, at the same time, came into possession of mysterious powers. Such powers meant more than just the indefatigable stamina to suppress one's own bodily appetites and pour contempt upon all worldly interests; they came to be viewed as the ability to work miracles and wonders. The holy man became more than just a model of stern piety and disciplined resolution; he was a veritable agent of great power to work marvels on behalf of the community. Here was the ancient pagan world of "oracles and divination" refitted for Christian consumption. "The rise of the holy man as the bearer of objectivity in society is" as once again Brown comments, "a final playing out of the long history of oracles and divination in the ancient world. The 'god-bearing' hermit usurped the position of the oracle and was known to have done so."<sup>32</sup>

The ancient world-view was possessed of the notion that what affects this life, whether for good or evil, had its source in what took place in the invisible world where a plethora of spirits and *demonēs* was responsible for everything that happened. Especially in an agricultural society where the prosperity or adversity of life was so hazardous an affair, and where life often teetered on the brink of ruin, poverty, or disease and starvation, people were eager to secure assistance against the demonic powers whose control of the elements of nature was unquestioned. Who better to aid them than the local holy man whose ability to intervene with the power of Heaven was not in doubt? Accordingly, "The idea of the holy man holding the demons at bay and bending the will of God by his prayers came to dominate Late Antique society...it placed a man, a 'man of power', in the centre of people's imagination...."<sup>33</sup> The holy man perched on his column out in the desert became the object of visitations by a regular procession of crowds, from peasants to court officials and imperial representatives, anxious to solicit his support for every conceivable exigency, whether it be concern for the crops or matters of state. The holy man acquired the status of an arbitra-

32. *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, p. 134.

33. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, p. 145.

tor or mediator between Heaven and earth. In doing so, he added new meaning to the Roman idea of the *patronus*, a man of prominence in the community on whose help large numbers depended in everything from healing to advice on legal matters. The holy man provided the historical background to what would emerge as the concept of the *patron saint*, a role that virtually undermined Christ as sole mediator between God and man.

#### 4• *Pagan Sources of Influence*

As we have already indicated, Monasticism derived primarily from non-Christian sources and attitudes. What were the distinctive and fundamental features of these significant influences?

As mentioned, the most pervasive influence came from the thought-world of what today is referred to as Gnosticism. Gnosticism in Late Antiquity was more a religious-cultural mindset than a particular school of thought or movement. To discover its origins has been for scholars an almost impossible task. About the most certain thing one can say is that it was the product of that special concoction called Hellenistic syncretism, a mixture of Greek, Iranian, and Jewish speculation. And like most composite ventures it offered itself in a variety of forms with peculiar emphases. There was no one thing called *Gnosticism*, any more than today there is any one thing called *Rationalism*. And yet there is a common mental framework that can be traced through each and every specific type. It is this shared perspective that gives it a unique cultural appearance, much as *secularism* today, although made up of endless traits, nevertheless exhibits general characteristic beliefs. With these alone are we concerned.

Above all, Gnosticism holds to a deep-seated dualistic world-view. "[A]t the base of Gnosis" explains Kurt Rudolph "is a dualistic view of the world which determines all its statements on a cosmological and anthropological level...."<sup>34</sup> There are two sides to reality, namely, one of matter and the other of spirit.

34. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, p. 57.

Furthermore, these two dimensions of things are profoundly and completely alien to one another. They are as opposed to one another as good is to evil. Basically, the realm of spirit is good, whereas matter is evil. It is not that matter has become evil; it is rather that matter *per se* is evil, and its very existence is due to an evil Being who brought it into existence. The significance of this doctrine is important so far as man is concerned, for man is a spiritual being who lives in an alien material body. This fact alone explains the cause of evil in man and in the world and leads to the conclusion that so long as man dwells in the body he is unavoidably contaminated with an evil that is antithetical to his true spiritual nature. The great problem, then, is to discover the way that will deliver man from matter and release him for his true *spiritual* existence.

Gnosticism's chief concern, then, was to offer a gospel of redemption from the realm of matter. To do so it had to explain the origin of matter and spirit as deriving from two separate divine sources, a good God and an evil God. Thus, not only is man as a spiritual being opposed to his material existence, but the true and good God is equally opposed to the realm of matter. In fact, in most Gnostic systems, spirit as such is God, and, since man himself is spirit encased in matter, he shares in the divine substance. If he seems not to know this it is because of an original ignorance which led him far away from his true *divine* nature. It is through *Gnosis*, or *knowledge* that man can recover his true self and return to his true home in the world of light and harmony. Accordingly, Hans Jonas writes, "Equipped with this *gnosis*, the soul after death travels upwards, leaving behind at each sphere the psychical 'vestment' contributed by it: thus the spirit stripped of all foreign accretions reaches the God beyond the world and becomes reunited with divine substance."<sup>35</sup>

Gnosticism represented a revolt against creaturehood. It hated the idea that man was finite and mortal. It did not wish to recognize that man was responsible for the evil that encompassed

35. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, (Boston: Beacon Press, revised edition, 1963), p. 45.

his life in this world. Its God possessed no personality; he simply stood for the possibility of liberation from finitude and creatureliness. The Gnostic concept of redemption was one of liberation from matter and time, not restoration of the whole of existence from sin and guilt. Under the influence of Gnosticism Christ came to play the role of one who liberates man by showing him the way. Christ was a model of how it could be done, a perfect exemplar of triumph over this world. Death, not resurrection, was the preeminent means of liberation and escape from the confines of the body. Much of this explains why Monasticism was supportive of a docetic Christology. A Christ who merely *appeared* in bodily form was more favorable to an outlook deeply antipathetic to the body than a Christ who actually became man in real *fleshly* terms.

The direct impact of Gnosticism on Christianity came through Judaism, for, without a doubt, "the majority of Gnostic systems came into existence on the fringes of Judaism."<sup>36</sup> This explains why Gnostic writings are so pervaded with Biblical themes and ideas. And if we keep in mind that the early Church, the Church in the time of the apostles, was predominantly Jewish in make-up, then we can understand so much of what the writers of the New Testament meant when they spoke so forcefully against heresies that even then were causing great upheavals in the various churches. Thus, in I Cor. 15:12 Paul writes, "But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" It is this last phrase that stands out. "No resurrection" meant for many no *literal* resurrection, for Christ was merely raised *in spirit*, as he never possessed true bodily existence, surely the suggestion of Gnostic ideas. Paul had to combat this false resurrection doctrine which Jewish Christians were getting from outside Jewish sources. Again, Paul had to combat a "deceptive philosophy," that apparently was enticing Colossian Christians, with the strong assertion that "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form..."(2:9) and that they should not be deceived "by

36. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, p. 277.

fine-sounding arguments.”(2:4). Furthermore, Paul berated those who made great cause and show of piety with “their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body,” which was “without any value in restraining sensual indulgence”(2:23). Paul tells Timothy that he is to “command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and genealogies” (I Tim.1:3,4). Gnosticism was full of this sort of thing. Concerning false doctrines that will be the product of “deceiving spirits,” Paul says that “They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods...”(I Tim.4:3). This, too, was true of Gnostic teaching and, as we saw, became a central feature of the Monastic life-style. Other examples could be provided, but with these we can at least discern something of the influence that a Gnostic-Judaistic presence had on the first century Church. Unquestionably, by the second century, with the beginnings of Monasticism, this pagan religion was starting to burrow deep into the conscience of the Church.

Asceticism, which in the main derived from the oriental culture of Gnostic dualism, stood firmly opposed to the classical concept of virtue as the assertion of the excellence of man in and through the world. For Classical man the world was not an altogether alien place, but was the product of a rational order, and man was fitted with the ability to discover the reason of that order and so to live in harmony with nature. This was especially true of the Stoic mind, the denouement of Classical culture. Of course, classical man, beginning with Plato, made a sharp distinction between spirit and matter, but classical man did not think that the latter, though recalcitrant, was necessarily alien to the higher spiritual ideal of life. Man was capable of making the material submit to the power of spirit or mind. The passions could be brought under the control of reason and compelled to obey the *inner* man in his pursuit of *Paideia* or ordered culture. Not so for Gnosticism. The realm of matter was viewed with complete hostility. The only option available was to be rescued from it through a fierce inner resolve to suppress every area of its insistence. This sharp contradiction between radically opposite cultural ideals would seem to exclude the possibility of any syn-

thesis between them. We might be surprised to learn, then, that a type of Monastic *Christianity* developed which, in fact, sought to combine aspects of both ideals and was to leave its legacy on the development of Christian culture in the West, in the Middle Ages especially, as the final stage of Monasticism. With the emergence in the late second and early third century of the Alexandrine school of theology we encounter for the first time the rise of an ascetic classicism as the form of a Christianity that would remain the essence of its ideal until modern times. To be sure, it was an alliance that was not easily, nor at all times, maintained, but, in general, it continued to assert itself against all attempts to dissolve it completely. Only when the Renaissance and Reformation came along did it finally collapse as a predominate cultural ideal.

The classical ideal conceived the life of the mind, of intellect and reason, to be the highest form of human activity. To contemplate the *form* of things, to grasp the logic of relationships, to transcend mere sensation and feeling to that higher realm of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty was not merely the greatest realization of what it means to be man, it was to rise to the level of god-like behavior. Connected with this activity was the idea of self-mastery and the inner formation of soul or character as the essence of what it means to be human and to live the happy life. He who attained this outcome was considered to be wise and was styled *philosopher*. To achieve this goal required a withdrawal from the world of ordinary concerns and an escape from mundane affairs. All preoccupation with practical matters and with things that concerned the needs of the body must be reduced to a minimum. How natural, then, for Monasticism to appreciate this aspect of the Classical world of thought! In the first place, it adopted the essential negation of the body and the realm of matter in general from Gnosticism. But mere negation was not enough; some sort of activity must take place, some kind of living in the world was required. What positive quality must one see in, especially, Christian living? It was Clement (c. 150–c.215) and Origen, the Alexandrine theologians, who, in the second place, brought to bear on the Monastic ideal the Classical



concept of the contemplative life of the mind. Here was the beginnings of the *Christianae vitae otium*, the concept of the Christian life as one of intellectual leisure and undisturbed contemplation.

Clement, as the older of the two, and having been Origen's teacher, may be responsible for fostering this development in the first place. He was the first to combine the emphasis on *Gnosis* of the Gnostic schools with the Stoic idea of contemplation and cultivation of mind. He liked the idea of a *deeper* understanding, but disdained the notion of it as non-intellectual. He did not hesitate to view Christianity in the language of higher *enlightenment*. For him Christianity was true Gnosis. The goal of the true believer was to rise above mere faith to the purer regions of *knowledge* and direct contemplation of God. Faith was a mere way station on the pathway to greater certitude and comprehension of the mystery of things. However, like Classical man, Clement thought of this task in elitist terms. Only a special few could ever hope to achieve such an exalted state in this life. Here was nurtured the concept of the expert theologian to whom the *simple* or ordinary believer must defer in order to solve the riddles and enigmas of God, man, and the world. This was especially so when it came to understanding the meaning of Scripture. Scripture was viewed as possessing metaphysical and ethical truths that the ordinary believer could not hope to comprehend. Only those who had acquired Gnosis, who had penetrated its recondite message were enlightened as to its true meaning.

If Clement initiated this trend, it was Origen who developed it as an art form. In Origen's mind Christianity meant conversion "from ignorance ... to enlightenment."<sup>37</sup> The real meaning of Scripture was as a source of deeper, hidden meanings made available by a process of interpretation leading beyond the literal and moral levels to the *spiritual* meaning that was of a higher and different order of knowledge. Origen began with the notion that "every word of Scripture meant something, other-

37. Frend, *The Early Church*, p. 90.

wise it would not have been written....”<sup>38</sup> But what it meant was not its redemptive-historical meaning, nor was it concerned to trace the re-establishment of God’s authority over man, a message about sin and redemption and covenant renewal. Its meaning lay beneath the surface of its language in an arcane search for the process of purification of soul from ignorance and irrationalism. Its message was about a Christ whose chief responsibility was to educate mankind in the proper way to rise above the world and to enter into sublime unity with God. Man was free to follow the lead of Christ, the embodiment of Logos, and so rise above his primitive existence to a higher culture of the mind, there to meditate on God in unobstructed spiritual ecstasy. Biblical Christianity was replaced with Platonic Christianity. The result was the incalculable devastation of a genuine Biblical culture in the formation of the West.

#### 5> *Quid sit Christianum esse?*

#### *Augustine – The Almost Reformer*

Aurelius Augustinus (354–430 AD), otherwise known to history as St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa, is without a doubt, the greatest Christian theologian and churchman of Late Antiquity. His greatness, however, lies not so much in his towering intellect which is demonstrated with such fascinating skill in his voluminous writings, but, far more importantly, in that he came to a clearer Biblical recognition of the falsity of the Monastic ideal and hence of the truth concerning God, man, and the world. With Augustine was inaugurated a theological tradition, appropriately designated the *Augustinian tradition*, which took hold in the West and provided a powerful countercurrent to the strong false Christianity which had virtually absorbed the church and threatened to drown it in the depths of an erroneous pagan outlook. We can only guess what might have been the result for Western Christianity apart from

38. Frend, *The Early Church*, p. 92.

the influence that this tradition made possible through this man's careful devotion to Scripture as the source of Christian faith and life. The wide differences that came to separate Catholic Christianity from Byzantine Christianity provide but one example of the enormous legacy which *Augustinianism* has left behind. Another is the fact that the Reformation, which broke once and for all with the predominant Monastic culture, as well as with the deadening humanistic hierarchicalism that flowered alongside it, was made possible on the foundation of a revived and purified Augustinianism. Clearly, this man's thinking has left no negligible mark on the West.

Our concern is not with the details of his life and thought, but with the painstaking reconsideration by Augustine of *what it means to be Christian*. That reevaluation was away from Monasticism and in the direction of a more faithful Scriptural understanding. This re-direction of thinking, because it was nothing less than seismic in scale, should not be underestimated. And, yet, we must add a word of caution. Although Augustine redefined the nature of Christianity, it is no little disappointment to consider that he failed to break as completely with the dominant Monastic ideal in his own life and actions. In the end, he merely checked its excesses; he did not attack its essential idea, and thus Monasticism continued to plague the church throughout the Middle Ages. It may have done so in any case: but equally it is just as possible that had he made a clean break and renounced it altogether he might have initiated a *reformation* as early as the fifth century. But, alas! Augustine pulled back from taking that momentous step. As a result, he leaves to us the legacy of a man whose place in the Church was that of an *almost Reformer*.

Most students of the history of church and doctrine are familiar with Augustine's personal pilgrimage to faith. The story is well-known of his upbringing under a pious mother whose ardent concern for her son's salvation was to meet with a youthful self-will and *flesh* filled worldliness on his part. After a long digression into the Classical heritage in order to find answers for his restless soul, he at last succumbed to her wishes that he join the Church and become a Christian. Of course, looking back

Augustine could rightly say that it was not because of his mother, though her prayers and tears were certainly instrumental in his conversion, but it was due to the mysterious workings of grace that God was pleased through the entreaties of his mother to effect in him a transformation of heart. Once he had made his choice in this respect he never turned back, and his life and thinking are a testimony to a man who advanced continuously in the direction of bringing every thought into submission to his Lord and to His Word.

However, at the beginning, it is well to remind ourselves, Augustine's assumptions were deeply colored with the central notions of the type of Christianity which by his day was universally accepted. The influence of Platonic thought and the concepts of Gnosticism as Augustine encountered them in the Manichees who were present everywhere, especially in North Africa, would shape his mind and behavior for years to come. Indeed, though he progressed beyond them to purer Biblical notions, the broad idea of Monasticism as the essence of what it means to be Christian, at least for those called to a higher perfection, never entirely left him. It was the Christianity that he first came to know, and nothing anywhere represented an alternative. How else was he to conceive it? And yet, in time, through closer contact with Scripture, he matured in his understanding to the point where he very nearly cast off its false assumptions completely. The catalyst in this change in his thinking was a certain monk, Pelagius, a man whose name came to stand for the greatest heresy in Christian doctrine until it was replaced by that of Arminius.

At the time that Augustine converted to Christianity he was already of the persuasion that the ascetic-classical synthesis best expressed the truth so far as the good of man was concerned. He accepted the notion that the best for man consisted in a life that aimed to liberate mind or reason from enslavement to sensuality and the fetters of subjection to bodily appetites and material concerns. Influenced by Platonist ideas, Augustine believed it possible to practice a morality of detachment and to experience an inner freedom from the body and its desires by

means of an innate rational power. When he became a Christian he began to recognize the erroneousness of this position, for no such rational power exists in man to lead him into the truth and right conduct. Augustine had learned the truth about *sin*. Man's achievement of the good through mere rational resources was no longer the essence of his faith. Instead, Augustine came to understand that man needed God's grace and initiative in salvation for the whole man, for the power of sin was too great for man to be able to overcome its ravaging effects on the whole of life. Sin, a deep-seated perversion in the inner man, was seen by him to be the *fons et origo* of corruption in the life of man against which no solution was available but what God himself had provided through Christ. Only by faith in God and what He has done did he come to know deliverance from sin's corroding power.

It was Pelagius who may be credited with spurring Augustine on towards redefining Christianity more in terms of this central Biblical teaching concerning the priority of God's grace for the restoration of moral health to man. Pelagius's chief concern was to teach the reformation of morals for the benefit of reforming society. But Pelagius did not regard the problems of society to lie in some shared human corruption called sin; rather, man's problem was bad habits which could be corrected by means of an inner resolve to be virtuous. Once he had willingly decided to pursue this course God would then *assist* him with grace and favor. Pelagius believed that man's body was a drag on his inner spirit which was basically good. But he was also confident that spirit in man was capable – it had the *power* – of constraining the body to be morally upright, *perfect*, in fact. Pelagius, and with him the entire Monastic-Classical world of thought, Augustine believed, was mistaken in its optimism about man. He was compelled to reevaluate this entire outlook in the light of Scripture. What he found there was a major departure from what had until this time held Christianity in a strong grip of error.

Augustine's great contribution to Western Christianity lay in a better understanding regarding the creation, including the whole material realm and the place of the body, and the cause of

evil in the world and the means to be saved from it. He denied the prevailing dualism of body and spirit which viewed the body as evil *per se* and regarded escape from it as the solution to man's problem. He also called into question the ascetic notion of the pursuit of *perfection* by means of harsh treatment of the body as the essence of holy living.

Augustine saw from Scripture that the whole world, including matter and the body, were products of God's creation. Matter and body were not something evil in themselves, nor did they cause man to do evil. God had a purpose for man in the way He made him and therefore to treat the body as alien was false. As Augustine wrote in *The City of God*: "A man's body is no mere adornment, or external convenience; it belongs to his very nature as a man."<sup>39</sup> More than this, the body as gender-defined was also quite normal. "For Augustine sexuality was without question part of man's created nature. Sexuality was part of what it meant to be human."<sup>40</sup> The Biblical view that *male* and *female* was as God intended it and that, furthermore, the bond of marriage was basic to His purpose for man from the beginning re-emerged as basic to Christian culture.

There is, of course, a disturbance at the center of life and the world, but it is not caused by desires of the body as such. Rather, the appetites of the body are themselves affected by this disturbance which Augustine recognized to be the result of a perversion in the soul of man inherited from an original disobedience of Adam in paradise. Sin has entered into man's experience for which man alone is responsible. By an act of will he brought upon himself the curse of disobedience. The body is stained with the pollution of soul and has come under the power of *lust*. Augustine would assert that "the corruption of the body, which weighs down the soul, is not the cause of the first sin, but its punishment. And it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful; it was the sinful soul that made the flesh corrupt-

39. Henry Bettenson, trans., *Augustine, Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), Bk I, Ch. 13, p. 22.

40. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, p. 60.

ible.” (Bk XIV, Ch. 3, p. 551) The spirit, as was long asserted, was not contaminated by the body; rather, the spirit itself was the reason for the contamination of the whole man, body and soul. No solution was to be found in attempts to deny the body its proper place in God’s creation.

Augustine saw the problem to be in the *will* of the creature. What he meant by the *will* is what today we would call the *heart*. An inner rebellion against God, a disobedience in the *heart*, is the reason for the moral perversion of man. What is more, man possesses no resources in himself to rectify this situation. His *will* is enslaved to the lusts of the flesh, and all attempts to free oneself by ascetic practices or rational self-control are entirely fruitless. Augustine recognized the absolute need of a power which was unavailable to man within his own experience. The power of God’s grace alone could restore man to moral health. We receive this grace by faith and not by merit. Further, we do not simply need it as assistance, but as complete necessity. Nor is faith merely for novices who leave it behind for a *higher Gnosis*. No Christian at any time is without the need to walk by faith and rely upon the grace and power of God alone to keep him in the right way.

The consequences for Monasticism were significant. The grounds for a distinction between a life of renunciation for *super* saints and an ordinary piety for average Christians became untenable. “In the last resort Augustine could admit only one division, that between those destined to be saved and the reprobate... Mediocrity and perfection were no longer opposite sides of a great divide that cut through the Christian community, creating a two-tier Church.”<sup>41</sup> As all were saved by grace, there was no longer reason to claim any superior value in the ascetic practices of those who sought perfection as a distinguishing mark of the Christian. For Augustine, the perfection of faith was a goal which *all* Christians must pursue, but which in this life they may never expect to achieve. Since none can be perfect in this life, there is no claim to anything special for monks, nor should one

41. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, p. 65.

believe they are capable of that which lay persons were not. No special group had a monopoly on faith or the grace of God. The goal of redemption is to restore man to a right obedience in life, not to seek release from it. Whatever was a part of man's life in the creation remained as much a part of it in redemption. To deny the body its rightful place in God's purposes, in both creation and redemption, did not make a man holy. Instead, holiness was something a person must first receive as an unmerited gift of grace. By means of it alone could a man start once again to make some progress in faith and obedience to God's will in all areas of man's life. Augustine had shifted the ground upon which the Monastic ideal had sought firmly to plant itself.

Augustinianism, in contradistinction from morose asceticism, encouraged an express affirmation of life. However, Augustine refused to surrender the idea of Monasticism fully to a richer Kingdom vision for Christianity. He could not imagine that Scripture offered, indeed enjoined, a comprehensive civilizational program, a total cultural project for man. He could not conceive that such an outlook was basic to its *gospel*. For Augustine this life was good and to be received with thanksgiving. But he still believed that those who left it for the life of the monastery and the Church in general chose a *better* calling than those who remained *in the world*. Marriage was all right, but it was essentially for *weaker* brethren. Life in the world in general, like commerce, work, civic duties, and so forth, were acceptable, but basically necessary evils. If one could, that is, if one possessed the faith, one should leave these behind for the cloister and the pursuit of "the community of the Heavenly City."<sup>42</sup> Augustine recognized that not everyone possessed such faith and so must live ordinary lives in the world.

Augustine, then, continued to adhere to the Monastic ideal, but stripped it of its ascetic excesses. It was a life that still required the renunciation of property, the practice of strict celibacy, and some obligations to fast but not so as to cause harm to oneself. He saw it in the context of the *Christianaevitae otium* –

42. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, p. 79.



communal living for the pursuit of wisdom. Monasticism existed to foster *fellowship* and a community of seekers after God. Why the concept of community was viewed by Augustine as only made possible on a Monastic basis is not easy to answer. He could not conceive of a Christian society as possible on any other basis. Augustine could not find the key to social formation and structure in Scripture. Like all his contemporaries who derived their ideas of society from pagan philosophy, Augustine basically adopted the Stoic ideal of friendship as the form of society most suitable for earnest Christians to live.<sup>43</sup> Its conception centered on a retreat from the world of material interests in order to live with like-minded companions in a life of leisured detachment and simplicity of devotion to learning and training in wisdom and virtue. Because Augustine shrank from completely renouncing Monasticism, he failed to break through the concept of *a Church within a Church*. He could not grasp *a Church within the Kingdom of God*.

43. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, p. 80.



## 4 • *The Growth of Hierarchy* *The Institutional Church Ideal*

Monasticism, which governed much of the faith and practice of Christianity for nearly a millennium and a half, was a major influence in shaping Western civilization. Having begun in the second century of our era, it endured throughout the Middle Ages, the period when Christianity's predominance in the West was unquestioned. Although it first appeared in the Greek East, its peculiar vision of the Christian life soon spread rapidly into the Latin West and eventually settled with consummate success in the Frankish and Germanic lands of north-western Europe. By the time of the High Middle Ages (1050–1300), hundreds of Monastic houses dotted the landscape of Europe, and thousands had renounced all in order to take refuge within their walls and practice the stringent asceticism demanded by the Monastic ideal. The history of Christianity's influence in the West cannot be properly understood without appreciating how Monasticism fashioned its life and creed.

But despite Monasticism's widespread success, it was not the only part of Christianity's cultural stamp to leave its imprint upon the formation of Western society. The development of the *institutional* church had an impact as great as that of Monastic withdrawal, for in the West the church developed as more than just one institution *in* society. When Christianity had attained religious domination, the church, as its organizational framework, emerged with a purpose to determine the shape of all aspects of society.

It would be a mistake, however, to view the history of Christianity in the West as indistinguishable from the history of the institutional manner in which it sought to express itself. The formation and growth of the church did not necessarily flow from nor abide by the essential contents of the Christian faith, but quite often deviated from it. Many Christians were frequently at odds with the organized church which could appear

remote and formal, and grew to be bureaucratic and domineering. These contentions arose primarily because the idea of *church* in Western civilization often has had little to do with anything taught in Scripture and much to do with pagan notions of social organization as these were conceived of by men whose aspirations and ideals derived from ancient imperial Rome. If the development of Monasticism can be traced back to pagan dualistic influences that derived from the Gnostic *counter-culture* of the ancient world, the ideas which gave shape to the institutional church were borrowed from the other end of the spectrum, from the dominant imperial and aristocratic ideals of institutional order that were the social cornerstone of Roman civilization. The church adopted, without much dissent, the governing methods that were the hallmark of the *political* system of the Roman empire, and, in so doing, embraced the aristocratic and hierarchical idea of rule that had been the ideological prop of Roman social control throughout its history. It was when Christianity had become a legally permitted religion of the Empire at the *conversion* of Constantine in the early fourth century, and subsequently gained undisputed sway as the sole legitimate religion at the end of that century during the reign of Theodosius, that it undertook major steps in this direction. In time, the church came to be viewed as the New Rome, with all the ambitions of the Old Rome, whose purpose was to govern, that is, to *rule*, the “total society” of the world – the *Universitas Christianorum*.<sup>1</sup> And like the Old Rome, a governing elite – the clergy, especially the bishops – would view themselves as possessing the natural prerogatives of leadership.

An empire needs an emperor. Since the capital of an empire determines where the emperor resides, and since Rome was itself the venerable capital of an ancient empire, now taken over by Christianity, then by such reasoning, the bishop of Rome should be seen as the highest authority over Christendom. The church in the West, under the influence of Rome, would mani-

1. The term is found in Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, (New York: Atheneum, 1976).

fest its power and prestige in the growth of a “papal monarchy.”<sup>2</sup>

However, before advancing this claim, two qualifications must be admitted: First, although the church sought to fashion itself institutionally after the image of imperial Rome, it did so at a time when an older Rome, in the traditional, secular, sense still existed. And while later emperors might view themselves, ostensibly at least, as *Christians*, they also saw themselves to be not so much *in* the church as *over* the church. The governing authority belonged to the *secular* order, not the *spiritual* order. The emperor was the head and all the clergy were his servants. There remained no room for a *clerical* emperor or pope. For many, this sentiment remained strong well into the Middle Ages. Consequently, when the church endeavored to erect a *papal monarchy*, a tense struggle ensued between the two sides – spiritual and secular – regarding who or what was to be the highest ruling power over all of society. As a result, the idea of a total society ruled by the church, that is, by the clergy-bishops at the head of which was the pope in Rome, never quite achieved the goal as it was intended. All the same, the ideal remained an article of faith and was fiercely pursued to the end of the Middle Ages.

Second, the idea of the church as a total society ruled by an aristocratic clerical elite, to the extent it was achieved at all, was only gradually realized over centuries. It was principally from the time of the *Carolingian revolution* – begun in the middle of the eighth century with the *anointing* of Pippin as king by pope Stephen II, but reaching its truest proportions only with the crowning of Charlemagne as emperor on Christmas day, 800 – that we are able to observe the widespread establishment of a clerical class, on vast feudal estates, being granted baronial status with its attendant administrative, judicial, and *political* duties, and accorded the honors and wealth associated with these. Nevertheless, the seeds of this development can already be found germinating nearly as far back as the church’s beginning. From

2. Colin Morris, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050–1250*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

its early years, many, and certainly her anointed spokesmen, conceived of the church as an agency of *rule* and regarded universal obedience *to the church* as the highest ideal to which every true Christian ought to submit.

This story is far too complex and tangled to recount in so short a space as a single chapter. Yet some attempt to explain why the church became so politically powerful and sought to dominate the whole of society for so many centuries must be included in any analysis of Western culture and history. We seek to capture some sense of the early history of this development and how it was expressed in the minds of those personalities who acted, or sought to act, in terms of the church as an agency of rule.

Having said this, however, we must keep in mind that history alone is not sufficient to explain the vision of the church in the minds of its ruling elites. It is also necessary to consider that we are dealing with an *ideology*. Ideologies are rarely the products of history as such, rather they are more the attempts to give shape to history according to some mental image constructed in advance, as something to which the actions of men and times are made to conform as to a pre-devised plan. For "Ideology," as Georges Duby perceptively observes, "is not a reflection of real life, but a project for acting on it." And when, as he also comments, it concerns the church the language that fashioned its project was nothing less than "the rhetoric of power."<sup>3</sup>

### *1> Ecclesia Universalis*

Before tracing the origins of the church as a total society ideal that took shape in the West, we shall first need to consider the *ideology* of society as it had reached its fullest development in

3. Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 8 & 9, 92. No understanding of the ideal which shaped the nature of the church in the middle ages could be complete without a careful reading of this indispensable work.

the High Middle Ages; for that ideology, far from making a sudden appearance, was but the final out-working of a type of thinking that had taken centuries to realize. By observing its mature formulation we can better understand the direction the development of the concept took from the outset.

From the confrontation in the High Middle Ages between the *spiritual* and the *temporal* powers regarding who should possess the highest authority over all of society, the issue of the church became an intense focus of theoretical reflection. While no doubt it may be presented as a dispute of equal concern to both sides, the actual conflict itself was provoked primarily by those of the clerical class (including the Monastic elites) who saw their interest in defending the papal primacy against that of the so-called *secular* emperor. A battle, then, was fiercely waged between pope and emperor over who held final authority to *rule* the total Christian society. Often this issue has been made to appear as a struggle between church and state. Such thinking, however, is anachronistic. The dichotomy of church and state belongs to a later period of history. It is out of place in the medieval view of things. Instead, the dispute was over which *side* – clerical or laical – of the *Ecclesia Universalis* had been granted the Divine right legally, morally, even politically, to regiment the life and behavior of each and every member, and to decide upon the uses to be made of every institutional arrangement of that society. The ideology that emerged from this contest, dominated as it was intellectually by clerics, was fashioned primarily to serve their interests as a group and ultimately the pope, the chief cleric and the highest power and authority in all of Christendom.

Since it was the clerical class who had for centuries possessed a monopoly of learning, we should not be surprised to find that it was they who first conceived of the church as an ideal of authority and power that favored their interests as a ruling order. At the same time, the basic features of that learning came from the classical world which, since the days of Origen and Clement in the late second and early third centuries, had continued to shape the thinking of those who attained leadership in the churches. By far the most influential pagan mind was Plato, but

primarily as he was interpreted through the lenses of Neoplatonism.<sup>4</sup> Down to and including the High Middle Ages it was Neoplatonism that influenced the way men thought of the church along with the gradations of authority and power that were visualized to exist within it. While much came from Scripture when men spoke formally concerning the church, substantive thinking was already shaped for the most part by a cosmic vision of order thought up on a Neoplatonic basis. Thus, the concept of the church did not derive so much from Scripture as from a pagan philosophy that sought to define the total nature of all existence and the relationship of higher beings to lower beings in a descending order of arrangement. Along with these metaphysical premises an idea of authority was posited to conform to the same essential hierarchical structure. To be sure, under Christian influence, the language of this philosophical perspective underwent a transformation, thereby adapting it to certain Scriptural principles. Nevertheless, the basic philosophical idea remained. We can observe the basic traits in this outlook from various statements in one of the most seminal studies on this period – Otto Gierke’s *Political Theories of the Middle Ages*.

Gierke noted that all thinking on the nature of society, on the church in particular, began from a reflection on the Whole and descended to the Part which was conceived of as a derivative of the Whole. Every matter was shaped within the framework of a “divinely ordered Universe” from which followed the notion “of a divinely instituted Harmony which pervades the Universal Whole and every part thereof. To every Being is assigned its place in that Whole, and to every link between Beings corresponds a divine decree.”<sup>5</sup> Such philosophical thinking is bound

4. See, David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, second edition, ed. D. E. Luscombe and C.N.L. Brooke, (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 18, 27, 28. It is not actually until the 13th century that Plato was replaced by Aristotle as the dominant pagan mind in the thinking of medieval men, and only then after considerable “official” opposition had finally been overcome.
5. Otto Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. W. Maitland, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p. 8.



to stress the Oneness of all things. Hence, Gierke comments, "Now the Constitutive Principle of the Universe is in the first place Unity." Unity, then, was the dominant theme, unity not merely in mind, but unity of organization, in law, in government, indeed in every department of social life. Such unity determined the nature of the *Ecclesia Universalis* regardless of the particular part played by each individual and each communal type. Unity in every respect was the predominate ideal of the church. Everything must be subordinated "to the aim and object of...the Principle of Unity." Whatever threatened unity was viewed as the worst of evils. Since God is One, therefore the world, as a perfect reflection of the Oneness of the being of God, must be One. The microcosm of the world mirrors the macrocosm of God who created it, and every part of the world is a further microcosm of the macrocosm of the world itself. All plurality must reflect the harmony of the Divine Reason which permeates the Universe.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the world, of man's life especially, is many-sided and diverse. In particular, several orders or classes of men exist in society and each has its own special function to perform. Besides unity, then, there exists plurality. But in the Christian-Platonic philosophical perspective unity takes priority over plurality. "Everywhere the One comes before the Many." More to the point, "all Order consists in the subordination of Plurality to Unity (*ordinatio ad unum*), and never and nowhere can a purpose that is common to Many be effectual unless the One rules over the Many and directs the Many to the goal."<sup>7</sup>

These twin notions of Unity and Subordination underlie the concept of the church as a total society in the medieval mind. Nowhere was this more true than in the social arrangement of mankind. Every particular must find its goal and norm in the service it renders to the ruling unity. This unity is the church. In order to achieve its aim it must possess one governing authority. But it is precisely at this point that matters become complicated,

6. Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Ages*, p. 9.

7. Gierke, p. 9.

for running through this twofold principle of unity and subordination is a more pervasive duality. It, too, would bear upon the way medieval men viewed the organizational nature of their society as well as the locus of rule or government that would insure that unity took priority over plurality. And it bore in particular upon the way the clerical class understood its own place in the imagined hierarchy.

This prevalent duality was that between Heaven and Earth. In medieval thinking this entailed the distinction between the realm over which God rules and the realm over which man rules. To be sure, medieval man, because his thinking was influenced by Scripture, thought of God as the ruler over *all* things, of heaven and earth alike. God was the universal monarch over the whole of creation. Once again, Gierke states, "The Middle Age regards the Universe itself as a single realm and God as its Monarch. God therefore is the true Monarch, the one Head and motive principle of the ecclesiastical and political society which comprises all Mankind."<sup>8</sup> But the idea of how God rules was attached to concepts borrowed from pagan antiquity. It is not through His Word and Spirit that God rules, but through analogous institutions in the earthly realm. God rules by conferring rule on a like *human* monarch. Such an earthly ruler stands in the place of God and exercises His authority over the whole of society in an analogy of God's rule over the whole of creation. Here we have what Walter Ullmann termed the "descending thesis of government."<sup>9</sup> It was a theocratic theory in which all power and authority was granted directly to a single officer who was responsible to God alone and all others were placed in unquestioned subjection to his authority.

Thus, while God ruled over everything, His rule over the lower order of the world was indirect. Here He bestowed His rule on a particular individual who acted in His place over the affairs of men. Consequently, "there was," says Gierke, "a ten-

8. Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Ages*, p. 30.

9. Walter Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 13.

dency to exalt the person of the Ruler. In his own proper person he was thought of as the wielder of an authority that came to him from without and from above. He was set over and against the body whereof the leadership had been entrusted to him. He was raised above and beyond the Community.”<sup>10</sup> The earthly monarch stood in the place of God and was responsible to no one but God. Furthermore, whatever he decided or decreed was to be obeyed with unquestioned devotion as if one were obeying God directly. In other words, a chain of command existed and the thought that man should obey God by believing and obeying His Word played almost no role in the medieval theory of rule. Man was obedient if he submitted to the institutional arrangements of society and to the persons or person who occupied positions of power at the top.

In such a scheme there could be only *one* person who occupied the supreme power to rule the “total society” in God’s place. As there was one monarch in heaven, so there could be but one monarch, as the *incarnation* of Divine power and authority, on earth.

It is at this point that a serious problem arises. For to whom, or to what institution, was such absolute rule to be granted? We can appreciate the difficulty involved only when we consider further the two-sided nature of man’s existence in the world. For, “along with this idea of a single Community comprehensive of Mankind, the severance of this Community between two organized Orders of Life, the *spiritual* and *temporal*, is accepted by the Middle Age as an eternal counsel of God.”<sup>11</sup> Here we find the distinctions, so pervasive in medieval thinking, between sacred and secular, clergy and laity, priest and king, *sacerdotium* and *regnum*, internal and external order. Both are aspects of the *Ecclesia Universalis*. Together they make up the total order of society. There was a third order, the peasantry, but they did not count all that much. They certainly played no role in the conception of *rule*.<sup>12</sup> That was solely a prerogative of

10. Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Ages*, pp. 33 & 34.

11. Gierke, p. 10.

the other two orders (peasants were not even considered a part of the laity or the secular order). But the mere fact of these two orders created a problem for the ideal of unity, for upon which order was the *higher* rule conferred? From which order came the *monarch* to be God's plenipotentiary on earth? He could only come from one. Consequently, one order or the other received the primacy over the total Christian society. In the medieval mind all other social issues and problems turned upon this most crucial of questions.

While the clerical class accepted the firm distinction between the two orders, the hierocratic logic insisted that the spiritual order be set over the temporal order, and that the head of the spiritual order, the pope, stood as God's earthly monarch. From God, through the pope, through the church-spiritual, through the church-temporal, was the line of the descent of authority and power to be properly traced. In this way unity was assured. This was God's eternal arrangement, so it was maintained, for the social life of man.

Such, then, was the ideology of the church as it came to shape Western civilization. It was conceived of as an *imperium* or a total governmental order, a top-down society. Only a pervasive sense of Christian morality and charity prevented it from exercising complete totalitarian powers. Furthermore, the rise of feudalism as a system of mutual obligations and rights worked as an effective check against the total centralization of power. The reality did not often resemble the theory. The temporal power, represented by the emperor-idea, which took its origins in the medieval west from the crowning of Charlemagne, but which went even further back to Constantine, always acted as a brake, a counter-ideology, to the notion of the priority of the spiritual

12. Duby, *The Three Orders*. "...first, there were those in possession of 'authority,' responsible for waging spiritual warfare; second, possession of 'power,' responsible for waging temporal warfare; and third, all those who did not carry the sword, the emblem of power, and yet did not pray, whose only right was to keep silent, and whose only duty was to obey, passive and abject: the 'serfs' or 'slaves' – *servi*." (p. 80)

order over the temporal order. In time, many would even reverse their relationship and claim the supremacy of the secular authority over the total society. That claim would be given a sinister twist when the humanistic aspect of thought in medieval thinking broke free from its synthesis with Christianity and began to chart the course of Renaissance and, eventually, of Enlightenment. Still, for centuries the church idea was rooted in the attempt to establish an institutional arrangement in which clerical authority was the source of order, and obedience to the church meant submission to the bishops, especially to Rome and the pope.

## 2> *The Church to Constantine, 2nd & 3rd Centuries.*

The formation of the church-idea cannot be studied like other doctrinal issues that confronted Christianity in the early centuries of its existence. For instance, unlike the great controversies surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity or the two natures of Christ, no life and death battles were fought over the doctrine of the church in terms of its institutional organization. Consequently, no significant body of writing about the church in any specific sense came into existence as a permanent record of the thinking of the early centuries on the nature of its institutional idea. At best, we can piece together a notion of the church primarily from those who occupied prominent positions in it and who sought to give expression to a principle of authority thought to be inseparable from it.

One thing is certain: Christianity, everywhere it spread in the early years of its existence, can be seen to have taken shape in some type of church community manifesting a principle of leadership and authority, with organized and regularized forms of assembly and worship. Much of what is known in this respect derives from the post-Constantinian years and emerges from those great city churches that were most involved with the doctrinal and moral issues of the day, churches like Alexandria, Antioch, Carthage, Rome, and eventually Constantinople. Others

come into view from time to time, but with less frequency and overall historical significance. Even so, what the men of these early centuries thought about the idea of church can be grasped not so much from any specific teaching or writing on the subject as by observing what procedures they followed and what administrative practices they applied. The concept of the church, which only solidified ideologically in men's minds when Christianity became the dominate religion of the Roman Empire, was more the product of how the church actually functioned than of it ever having derived from a carefully thought-out doctrinal (i.e., Scriptural) point of view.

Though much of what is known of the structure and organization of the church is post-Constantinian, nevertheless it can be said that earlier traces of the formation of the church are not altogether lacking. This is apparent from roughly the mid-second century when information about the church and its activities, following the apostolic period, first emerges into the light of history. Almost as soon as we can study anything with some depth the church already appears pretty much as it will remain for the next several centuries. That is, the institutional structure of the church, wherever we meet with it, looks to be a settled affair and, with the exception of heretical counter-churches, especially those of the Marcionite persuasion, almost no objection is voiced concerning whether or not the church is properly following Biblical direction. Everywhere it is assumed to be so. The only problem confronting the church was the question of the *true* church versus the *false* church as these were held to exist where orthodoxy and proper episcopal authority were maintained or subverted by heresy.

In the second and third centuries, the church did face the problem of persecution from the pagan Roman world, particularly from its ruling elites, and as a result experienced a difficult crisis in maintaining itself in any institutional guise whatsoever. No doubt, the experience of persecution helped to contribute to an idea of the church. The pressure of these events would have convinced many that in order to survive it was necessary to band together and rally to some leader who could defend the sub-

stance of the faith before the hostile ruling powers. When the churches finally did emerge from this experience the authority of the bishop as the organized leader was considerably enhanced.

However, the rule of the bishop was not the product of this experience alone. It had already arisen as the principal form of rule in the churches which looked to the example of the secular idea of authority in the ancient world of Rome in general. Already in the second century, before persecution became an official response to the spread of Christianity, the church in every location had begun to pattern itself after the administrative example of Roman governing practice. In the words of A.H.M. Jones, eminent scholar of late Roman antiquity, "The basic organization of the church had been formed long before the Great Persecution. Each Christian community, or church in the narrower sense, was ruled by a bishop whose powers were autocratic." Furthermore, as we shall see, "The church in the ecclesiastical organization normally corresponded to the city in the secular administrative scheme."<sup>13</sup> The seeds of a hierarchical church formation were planted early. Explaining the causes, however, poses no small difficulties.

It is clear from the pages of the New Testament that the evangelistic work of the apostles in the mid-first century was geared to the founding of churches in various locations. Churches were often described by the name of the city where they were begun: Corinth, Ephesus, Rome. But, not always! It is difficult, for example, to know exactly where the Galatian churches were located. And writers like James or John (I, II, III) are even less clear about whom they were addressing. Still, it seems evident that the goal of the spread of the gospel was to plant churches. We are even given to understand that such churches were to exhibit certain characteristics of organization, including a principle of leadership, so as to present an effective witness and to insure proper worship and instruction in Scripture.

13. A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602*, Vol. II, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 874 & 875.

A major feature of modern scholarship regarding this phenomenon has been to aver that the early church was initially a type of Jewish synagogue with oversight by a group of elders. Perhaps, so. It does not imply, however, that the church thought it could organize on just any basis. The apostles were keen to provide authoritative direction in the matter of the institution of the church. They knew that their own time was limited but that the church would last until the end of history. They were, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, intent on leaving an organization in existence that, by God's grace, would continue to multiply and be transmitted to whatever future generations God had purposed to bring into existence. That the church assumed a permanent, institutional form only as a result of a changed expectation by primitive believers in the immediate return of Christ and the eschatological end of the world is a fancy of the modern critical imagination.

When we leave the New Testament era we encounter a nearly sixty-year evidence gap referred to as the sub-apostolic period. It extends from the Jewish uprising and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD to the second Jewish war and destruction of Jerusalem in 135 AD.<sup>14</sup> When we emerge on the other side we begin to discern the lineaments of a church order that are essentially what will develop during the next several centuries. That is, we discover the existence of well-organized gatherings run by a clerical order over which the *bishop*, as the principal leader, possessed vast power. Under the bishops, one finds *presbyters* and *deacons* as a distinct sub-class of a clerical system that is beginning to look like a professional group set apart from the laity as a whole. It is weak by comparison with what it will become, but an unmistakable change has occurred.

One of the chief reasons for this transformation was a shift in the composition of the members of the church from being predominately Jewish-Christian in character to almost exclusively Gentile-Christian. This alteration also marked a change in the cultural thought-patterns that influenced the vision of the nature of the faith and especially the meaning of Scripture as a total covenant word. For with the transmission of Christianity to a larger



Gentile world there entered into the thinking of many churchmen much that reflected the older pagan cultural milieu. This was especially evident in the kind of church-idea that began to emerge. The church began to assume an organizational form that was patterned on the type found in the secular Roman world. It reflected the belief in a natural ruling aristocracy as a top-down principle of command and control. Gradually the bishop became less a pastor or minister, a servant of the church, and more a bureaucratic voice of power. This development was uneven and not entirely without some warrant in the face of attacks coming from outside the community of the faith. However, it would not be accurate to claim that the church developed its system of government solely in response to external pressure. In the area of organization certain ideas, those which held that Roman governing methods were the best given their success in the secular empire over which Rome ruled, were too ingrained and taken for granted in the absence of a cogent insightful understanding of Scripture.

14. There seems to be a singular exception in this case. As Elaine Pagels indicates, a letter is attributed to a certain Clement (Bishop of Rome, c.90–100) who, in writing to the Corinthians, denounces them for having removed certain of their leaders from office. In Clement's eyes this is "a rebellion" and [he] insists that the deposed leaders be restored to their authority." For Clement, rebellion against leaders in the church is rebellion against God. Why so? Pagels gives the following explanation: "Clement argues that God... alone rules all things: he is the lord and master whom all must obey.... But how is God's rule actually administered? ...God, he says, delegates his 'authority to reign' to 'rulers and leaders on earth.' Who are the designated rulers? Clement answers that they are bishops, priests, and deacons. Whoever refuses to 'bow the neck' and obey the church leaders is guilty of insubordination against the divine master himself." She goes on to claim that in this letter for the first time "we find here an argument for dividing the Christian community between 'the clergy' and 'the laity.' The Church is to be organized in terms of a strict order of superiors and subordinates." See, Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 34, 35. Segments include references to Clemens Romanus, *I Clement* 3.3

To appreciate better why the church in the Gentile communities developed as it did we need to understand something of the broader society into which Christianity entered. Roman society in the period of late antiquity (from about AD 200 and even earlier) was increasingly an urban society. The vast majority of the population lived in major city centers which at this time were swelling in numbers. A movement from the countryside to the city had been going on for some time, but in this period increased substantially.

It is in this urban context that Christianity first took hold and swiftly spread. It was especially among the new immigrants, who were often poor and propertyless, that Christianity initially made rapid gains. Many of these people were part of the unplaced and displaced segments of a social order that was undergoing tremendous upheaval. Rome had always been an aristocratically dominated society. It continued this way well into late antiquity. However, since the reorganization under Augustus, the participation of not only the plebes but the patricians in the governing affairs of the empire declined and was replaced primarily by a permanent bureaucracy appointed by and solely responsible to the emperor. At the same time that changes were taking place politically, there was also a widespread shift in economic conditions. As fewer people could directly benefit from the cultural heritage of Rome, so too, for many, particularly the traditional small landholders, the means of livelihood became impossible to sustain. Wealth moved increasingly in the direction of the great estates, and a widening gulf opened up between the rich few and the many poor. This mass movement to the cities was for some a desperate attempt to find a new life in the growing commercial enterprise zones and mercantile world that were fast becoming the chief characteristics of the great urban centers.

The growth of the cities produced a large underclass, one that was rootless and lacking in a sense of traditional community or close ties of family and friendship. From a strictly sociological viewpoint, Christianity attracted great numbers of these people precisely because it filled this void. It offered a new sense of community and attachment. It would be improper, however, to infer

that this was the only reason that Christianity gained many converts among these classes. Throughout history mankind has manifested a strong desire for religious certainty and some sort of salvation, and Christianity's strength undoubtedly lay in the truth in contrast to the pagan religions of old Greece and Rome. At the same time, it contributed a new idea of community. It especially ripened in the urban centers as *church*, for it was in the cities that the characteristics of the church concept began to take shape.

In various locations these churches found themselves the objects of hatred and suspicion, sometimes from a clique of the people, at other times from public officials who regarded the new faith as undermining civic morale and traditional values. Often the church in a city was viewed as a dissident society against which actions needed to be taken to halt its expansion and harmful influence. The church needed to assuage hostility against itself. It needed a spokesman who could deal with the unfriendly authorities and who could articulate the faith in clear and concise terms. Naturally, that person was almost always the local bishop. Out of this experience, a traditional Roman custom that carried over into the church community acquired new life, the tradition of dependence on a great man – a *patronus* – who could intervene with the government to secure benefits which the ordinary subject could not hope to get on his own. In turn, the patron would expect loyalty and devotion to his status and power. Thus, as Judith Herrin writes, “From this humble beginning as the nominee of a particular community, the position of bishop developed into a more exalted one, with special rank in the hierarchy of the whole community of Christians.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, a direction was set early. In time the bishop assumed still greater prominence. Eventually, “The communal nature of Christian groups... was replaced... by a ranked society... [with] various stages of office advancing to the episcopacy.” At the same time, the church began to organize itself in imitation of the

15. Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 58.

secular government. That is, “this urban and episcopal character created an ecclesiastical government in parallel with the secular one....”<sup>16</sup> Bishops took charge of city and provincial territory which was coextensive with that of the secular authorities. They came to have jurisdiction over a *diocese* in which many churches were established. During the course of this development the nature of the bishop’s task changed from that of pastor over a particular congregation to that of administrator of a district. This idea of the bishop as an administrator offered a greater appeal to the governing and aristocratic classes of the Roman world and thereby brought more members of them into the church, along with their wealth. When this occurred the church began slowly, but ineluctably, to acquire landed property together with its revenue. This trend brought the church into greater prominence politically, for its trained clergy were beginning to appear as useful for more than just pastoral duties. The church began to take an interest in the preservation of ancient patterns of social organization, for it reflected those patterns itself.

At first, the church used its growing wealth for ostensibly charitable and welfare purposes. At this early period, the church would not have accepted the need for rich adornments and splendid church buildings. Its wealth must be used to assist the poor, the suffering, the helpless. Its success in this endeavor was another major reason for its rapid increase in numbers and influence. Still, the method of organization that gained sway would grow to manifest a different purpose from its original aim to spread the gospel, convert the heathen and perform works of mercy. Herrin notes, “Due to its urban environment and administrative responsibilities, the episcopal church was destined...to grow further and further away from the Christian teaching of poverty and the denial of worldly goods. It became more like an additional arm of secular administration....”<sup>17</sup> Much of this lay in the future, but already the second, and particularly the third, century saw movement in this direction on a scale, perhaps, greater than we may imagine.

16. Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom*, p. 59.

While a strong leader and an eloquent spokesman, around whom the faithful could rally in the face of opposition from the pagan world, helped make possible a type of church organization that tended to concentrate power and authority at the top with the bishop, while the growing administrative requirements of a church, which began to acquire property in land and to *govern* territories in which many small churches resided, also worked to elevate the status not only of the bishop but of a growing clerical professional class, still another contributing factor in the development of a hierarchical church was the widespread influence of Gnosticism.

We have already had occasion to speak of Gnosticism in the previous chapter with respect to the rise of Monasticism. No less important is the direct bearing that Gnosticism had upon the nature of the organized church as it became necessary for churches in various areas to respond to the Gnostic threat. Gnosticism was a very seductive heresy, which those not well-grounded in Scripture could easily be tempted to follow. It was clever in its use of Scripture and offered a type of redemption for many who found themselves cut loose from their traditional moorings. Gnostic communities often competed with the church for the loyalty and devotion of many people so affected. Within the church they competed against the bishops for the loyalty of the members, until they were driven out. The churches found themselves in a quandary as to how to deal with this threat.

Instead of combating this heresy by developing an effective argument grounded in Scripture, the churches responded by declaring the problem to be one of the proper recognition of the authority of the church. Those who wandered off to follow after heresy were leaving their obedience to the true church. But the authority of the church was the authority of its local bishop. Thus, the two were equated, and the bishop became the focus of

17. Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom*, p. 59. We ought to question, of course, whether the "Christian teaching" on "poverty" and "worldly goods" is Scripturally accurate or merely reflects pagan ascetic notions. Much of what passed for Christian teaching in this period was quite suffused with un-Biblical influences.

unity in doctrinal matters. The argument, then, was that in order to counter false Gnostic thought Christians needed to maintain *unity* with the true bishop and his authority in doctrine. By such reasoning, the earlier notion that the bishop was God's representative on earth acquired even greater weight. His authority was God's authority, and submission to his proper authority was equivalent to submission to the truth. To bolster this idea another notion was advanced. The bishop possessed his authority by reason of having inherited it from the apostles. He succeeded to the place of authority in the location where they had founded it. As the apostles had received their authority originally from Christ, so those who succeeded them, who sat in their seats, derived their authority from them. Only by maintaining unity with a bishop in his inherited office was the church assured of being the true church.

The important element in this line of reasoning is that the notion of *inherited* authority takes its place alongside that of Scripture itself. Here was introduced the concept of *tradition* that rose to equal the Bible as authority for the church. Tradition originally meant succession to apostolic authority. This authority was exactly the same as that of the apostles. In Chadwick's description we see something of what this implied: "The succession argument carried the implication that the teaching given by the contemporary bishop of, say, Rome or Antioch was in all respects identical with that of the apostles."<sup>18</sup> The bishops of these and other churches were in possession of the exact same authority the apostles themselves possessed during their time on earth. Their words carried the same weight and required the same obedience as that of the apostles.

At first, what they proclaimed generally followed Scripture, so there was no basic conflict between what the apostles said and what a bishop said on his own. But there was nothing in the succession theory to prevent him from adding his own doctrinal words to those of the apostles when it seemed suitable and

18. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, (Penguin Books, 1990), p. 42.

then claiming obedience to these to be the mark of the true church! If the bishop's authority is as direct from God as was that of the apostles, the idea of a closed canon of Scripture is readily diminished in his thinking and speaking. In response to the need to counter the widespread influence of Gnostic ideas a concept of authority in the church was introduced which in time would rival and even replace that of Scripture.

An important factor that contributed to this development, one that also emerged from the sub-apostolic period, was the need the church felt to distinguish and separate itself from Judaism to which it seemed related in the eyes of many. As both were based upon a large portion of the same Scripture, Christianity was seen as a mere splinter from Jewish thought and religion. As Pelikan indicates, "What was offensive about Christianity in the eyes of Gentiles was, to a considerable extent, what it had inherited from Judaism."<sup>19</sup> To the Roman governing authorities the Jewish devotion to the law of Moses was viewed as a source of political trouble, the reason for their persistent rebellion against imperial control. Since Christianity revered these writings as well, it was viewed with equal suspicion. Christians were concerned, then, that they not be viewed as a Jewish sect.

While Christians and Jews shared a portion of Scripture, their respective approaches to it were entirely different. For, besides the Old Testament, Christians had the New Testament, which fundamentally altered their understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures. They saw it as a grand prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ, who was the fulfillment of all that it taught, a view vehemently rejected by pious Jews. Since the Christians presented a threat to the Jewish faith (and to Jewish nationalism) with these claims, and since they were suspect by the Roman authorities, Jewish communities everywhere, but especially in the east, did much to stir up trouble for the church. And because the Jews possessed such hatred for the claims of Christ and Christianity, many Gentile believers were filled with no little revulsion

19. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100–600), (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 14.

for Jews. Many of the writings of the early apologists contain acrimonious criticism of Jewish ideas and religious beliefs.

This confrontation between Jews and Christians had, at least for Christians, serious repercussions for the authority of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. Not wanting to be identified with Judaism, and thinking to bolster their assault on Jewish unbelief and, at the same time, appeal more favorably to the pagan mind, Christians went to considerable lengths to deny the validity of the Mosaic law in its totality. Rather than seeing how the authority of *Moses* carries over into the New Testament era which began with the apostles, the church instead originated a seriously erroneous doctrine, one that has afflicted it for nearly two thousand years. It rejected the validity and authority of the law in Scripture, consequently denying that Scripture has any sense of law at all. The effect was a weakening of the authority of Scripture in general. The church had to construct a total outlook on life from the New Testament alone, particularly from the writings of the apostles. Although the church did retain a formal authority for the Old Testament, quite often it interpreted its content essentially allegorically, or, less seriously, typologically. Rarely, however, did it view its content covenantally.

When the problem of authority began to crop up in the church during the second and third centuries, many, not being able to rely upon the total authority of Scripture as a self-sufficient covenant word, gave credence to the notion of the *authority of the church* in general, and soon the *authority of the bishop* in particular. The way was opened to an authority for the church other than God's word. "Whenever antinomianism abounds in history," as Rushdoony comments, "the church's power is vastly enhanced."<sup>20</sup> Coupled with the adoption of Greek philosophical concepts as a means to demonstrate the truths of revelation and convince pagan Gentiles of the superiority of Christianity, it becomes understandable why the church lost its Scriptural moorings and developed in the West as a total society ideal, inwardly

20. Rousas John Rushdoony, *Law and Society, Vol. II of the Institutes of Biblical Law*, (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1982), p. 334.



formed as a Monastic culture but outwardly ruled by a clerical elite. In time the church would seek to take over the older Roman imperial vision of a unified and top-down control.

Although the early church set aside the validity of the law in order to distance itself from Judaism, it did retain from the Old Testament the idea of the *priesthood*, that also remained a part of the Jewish heritage. In the Old Testament the Levitical priesthood was a special office conferred upon Aaron and his male descendants. They alone were endowed with the privilege of approaching the holy sanctuary and offering sacrifices. They, and their Levitical relatives, were in charge of instructing the people in the lawful requirements for life and worship. The priest necessarily occupied, at least in later thinking, both Jewish and Christian, a ranked status, one that was not only superior in the social sense, but also stood higher in terms of direct communion with God. The people could not expect to achieve the same degree of intimacy and contact. As the priesthood in the Old Testament mediated between God and His people so, too, the bishop, as the New Testament equivalent of the Levitical priest, must mediate for the people.

This thinking misunderstood the special limited place of the Aaronic priesthood in redemptive history. It was only to serve in a temporary capacity until the final priest, Jesus Christ, should come and perfectly accomplish God's purposes for His people. Moreover, the priesthood, while it required a special office under the older testamental system of redemption, was not ultimately what God had intended. For Moses, in transcribing God's own words, declares to Israel as a whole – "...you will be for me *a kingdom of priests* and *a holy nation*." (Ex. 19:6) But it is the New Testament church in particular for whom the priesthood covenant (*holy nation*) becomes especially realized. As Peter wrote, speaking of the whole church, "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood...." (I Pet. 2:5) The whole church is a priesthood, and every member a priest. There is no longer a special office to be designated by the term *priest*. Consequently, no mediatorial role between God and the people belongs any longer to a special

human agent. The only mediator is Christ in heaven. And only His word and Spirit rule the life and faith of the believer.

But the early church adopted the notion of the Levitical priesthood, in its strictly Old Testament sense, in order to give greater prominence to the special place and authority of the bishop. No better example of this sort of thinking could perhaps be found in the pre-Constantinian church than in the writings of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (circa 248–258), who was one of the earliest to speak of the Christian clergy as if it was a Levitical priesthood. The bishop was above the people and through him God imparted His grace to the church. There could be no church without a designated bishop, and no church could appoint its own bishop.<sup>21</sup> Only other bishops could elect a fellow bishop. No bishop not properly ordained can be legitimate and thus no church without a properly ordained bishop is a true church. Everything began to turn on the authenticity of the bishop. As the bishop was God's *special* priest, so no real contact with God and with his salvation was possible apart from submission to His priest. The bishop alone interpreted the Scriptures; he alone could administer the sacraments. In short, "The bishop is in the church, and the church is in the bishop." The final purpose of the bishop is to insure unity and to guarantee institutional ecclesiastical integrity. The result of this doctrinal development was to exalt the church institution and its clergy, to "limit God's redemptive and sanctifying workings in history to the institution."<sup>22</sup> All other areas of life – the family, the state,

21. Cyprian writes: "Hence you should know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop, and that if anyone is not with the bishop he is not in the Church; and that those people are vainly beguiling themselves who, not being at peace with the priests of God, creep up stealthily, and trust by underhand means to enter into communion with certain persons: seeing that the Church is catholic and one, and may not be sundered or divided, but should assuredly be kept together and united by the glue which is the mutual adherence of the priest." Henry Bettenson, ed., *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 266.

work, technology, learning – except where they came within the purview of the institution of the church and the needs of its clergy, were all but excluded from any broader implication for covenant and dominion service under God.

Cyprian, however, was no innovator. His thinking was shared by others. What is more, Cyprian, like his fellow bishops, saw the existence of bishops as a collectivity. As yet an *emperor figure* or *supreme priest* was missing. However, in the line of apostolic succession a special niche was already being carved out for Rome. For the church there was founded by the greatest of apostles, Peter and Paul. To the extent that they obtained primacy over the other apostles, this particular church acquired a preeminent position. Though this notion was already expressed in the second and third centuries it is dealt with more properly in the post-Constantinian context.

### 3> *The Constantinian Revolution*

The rise to power of Constantine as emperor (307–337) of Rome brought about a dramatic change in the status of Christianity within the empire. The nature and extent of this transformation is far more apparent to us today than to those who lived through it, for we are in a far better position to understand the impact of the *legalization* of Christianity and what it has meant for the development of Western civilization. Paul Johnson does not exaggerate when he asserts: “The so-called ‘Edict of Milan’, by which the Roman Empire reversed its policy of hostility to Christianity and accorded it full legal recognition was one of the decisive events in world history.”<sup>23</sup>

At the time, all that the church understood was that it was to be no longer officially persecuted for the faith it practiced. Few could guess that Constantine intended not simply to permit one more religious sect the same freedom accorded to dozens of

22. Rushdoony, *Law and Society*, pp. 340 & 342.

23. Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p. 67.

others, openly to practice its worship so long as it remained obedient to Roman authority, but to found the Roman empire upon an altogether new and vibrant religion. The pagan gods had all but lost their grip upon the heathen world, and the *vision of Rome* that was the chief feature of their religious devotion was losing its moral hold on the consciences of its citizenry. Constantine wanted earnestly to redefine the idea of Rome in terms of a religious faith that was alive and on the move, not dead and decaying. In his eyes, Christianity was that religion. It was not enough merely to legalize it; he was determined to identify it as the official policy of the empire and to merge the church with the imperial system of rule, with himself as its head and monarch. Christianity was about to become a state religion. It is this remarkable change in the circumstances of the church that gives Johnson's remark such poignancy.

However, while this change in status was not expected – certainly not in the sense that Christianity was to be given standing as the official religion of Rome – it was soon embraced by many Christian writers with nearly unbounded enthusiasm. It brought about a major theological shift in Christian thinking about Rome and a transformed ideological outlook regarding the society of which it was now a part. Christianity had been viewed by official Rome as an outcast, if not an outlaw, religious faith, and Christians had perceived themselves as in perpetual opposition to pagan Rome, the product of Satan and therefore evil, the Beast of the book of Revelation. The Beast sought only to devour the church and destroy the faith. Persecution in this life was all that Christians could expect. Furthermore, Christians could not be a part of the official Roman world, for service to Rome required attendance at public functions and participation in pagan religious ceremonies which only profaned a person's faith. One had to swear undying devotion to Rome. Such an oath would place a person's commitment to Christ in dire jeopardy, for Rome was jealous of its *divine* prerogatives. Christ and Rome could not both be Lord and master. No compromise was conceivable. There could be no mixture of Christianity with Rome in any sense other than to hope for peace from the tyranny

of its persecuting authorities and emperors.

However, when Constantine fundamentally transformed the relationship between Christianity and Rome, he concurrently provoked a refashioning of the idea of Rome in Christian thinking. For with the passing of persecution many were quick to change their minds about Rome. Although Christianity did not become the enforced official religion, and paganism outlawed, until the end of the century during the reign of Theodosius, nevertheless a great change in viewpoint had already been brought about under Constantine. Rome was now given a more favorable place in Christians' estimation. The *pax Augusta* in particular was seen more positively as having "an important place in the divine plan of salvation."<sup>24</sup> No longer was the empire simply the Beast and therefore merely the work of Satan. Instead, it received a new theological definition as belonging to God's purposes for the world and for Christianity especially. The thought emerged that Rome and the Church did not constitute implacable enemies, but were two sides of the same reality, and therefore should be part of the same *polity*. A new vision of the Church, combined with the older Roman imperial ideal as the product of the divine plan for history, took shape and gave impetus to the concept of the Church as a total governing society and God's intended agency for world-dominion.

The numbers grew rapidly of those who were captivated by this change in outlook. Fulsome praises were offered not only for the abrupt turnabout in circumstances of those who professed the faith, but more significantly for a Christianity redefined as the new imperial religion and a *Christianized* Rome as the instrument of God's salvation purposes. Perhaps none was as adulatory in this respect as the ecclesiastical historian, Eusebius of Caesarea. In his mind, not only Rome, but Constantine in particular, acquired a special place in the divine program of redemption.<sup>25</sup> Constantine was God's instrument of change and

24. R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, (Cambridge: At The University Press, 1970), p. 50.

25. Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 249 & 254.

the one entrusted with divine authority to rule the new “Christian times.”<sup>26</sup> The Constantinian revolution was to bring about a blending of politics with the church, a gradual transformation of the church into a new instrument of political administration. One consequence was to elevate the bishop’s office as an agency of political power and bureaucratic control.

What this great change meant for the rise of the church at Rome in particular has now become apparent. Upon no other church did Constantine lavish such attention and good will as he did that of the church at Rome.<sup>27</sup> Constantine was not responsible for the primacy that the *bishop* of Rome began to claim for himself, but he did defer to the belief, already current in the second century, that Rome occupied a special place among the churches based upon the fiction of apostolic succession, and the claim to possess the *keys of St. Peter*, the greatest privilege in Christendom. By the third century, the see of Rome had begun to acquire property and was beginning to have a reputation for being well-endowed. With Constantine the grants of largess to Rome went far beyond anything previously experienced by the church. Almost overnight the church at Rome became one of the largest, if not the largest, landowners in Italy, certainly in the environs of Rome itself.

This material prosperity was to affect the role of the clergy, since the needs of the administration of properties compelled a broadening of the meaning of *clergy*. Addressing the growing problems of administration demanded the creation of a whole series of minor orders. Under the bishop ranked presbyters, deacons, sub-deacons, acolytes, exorcists, readers and doorkeepers. The clergy became a vast civil service in which one made one’s way through advancement and promotion. At the same time, the clergy was elevated above the people and came to reflect the older Roman ideal of an elite aristocracy with its attitude of condescension and self-assured dignity. People were expected to treat the bishop especially with awe and reverence, to stand up

26. Markus, *Saeculum*, passim.

27. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 49

when he entered and left. The church became more absorbed with formal liturgy and a system of penitence, both of which were closely guarded preserves of the clergy. Cyprian had already advanced the notion that a lay person's sins could only be *absolved* by one of the higher clergy. One must seek penitence and forgiveness from the clergy. There was no longer direct access to the Lord of the church. The church at Rome expanded this concept with consummate success.

Constantine also gave the clergy, especially at Rome, a greater part in the secular jurisdiction as civil magistrates. Church courts acquired legitimate judicial status in civil matters. This prompted prospective young clerics to seek training more in keeping with forensic expertise than with Scripture and theology. Those were sought out for clerical posts who possessed this kind of learning, and such occupations appealed to the aristocratic classes as established careers to which their sons might aspire for other than exclusively religious reasons.<sup>28</sup> For many, ecclesiastical office would become the goal of worldly status and social influence.

In the ancient world buildings and architecture were specifically designed and erected to symbolize the power and prestige of ruling nations or empires. The glory of the earthly city of man was displayed outwardly by means of impressively constructed edifices such as temples, forums, monuments or by other public works, whether purely symbolic or more immediately practical, such as amphitheaters, roads and aqueducts. As the church gained in stature and worldly prominence in the post-Constantinian decades, it, too, sought to reflect its new-found prestige in symbolic form. Thus, began the construction of the basilica. The church *building* would provide solid evidence of the church's new and exalted institutional standing and an enduring representation of its power and authority. "Early Christian architecture" claims Herrin, "was clearly designed to impress, and to this end the use of different coloured marbles, stone, brick, fresco, mosaic, and painted sculpture were judi-

28. Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 174.

ciously combined.”<sup>29</sup> This emphasis upon church architecture would soon substitute for the words and deeds of faith. The grandiose scale on which these buildings were erected suggests that they were far from having a merely functional task to perform. They were carefully planned to emphasize to the populace the preeminence of the church, and of the clergy who governed it. They symbolized the fusing of the church with Rome that the Constantinian change had brought about.

In the fourth and fifth centuries definite voices can be heard to exalt the special place and importance of the Roman primacy, the sound of whose words is scarcely distinguishable from the praises heaped upon the ancient empire of the same name by her pagan spokesmen.

Damasus (Pope, 366–384) was perhaps the first to revel in the majesty of a papal splendor that would illuminate the pages of history for centuries to come.<sup>30</sup> His single aim, it would seem, was to present Christianity as the true imperial religion and to declare Rome to be the capital of a *Christian* empire. Not only did he undertake great building projects in the city, he also implemented an annual civic festival in honor of Peter and Paul, who were now regarded to be the protectors of the *Christian* Rome. This imitation of the pagan past (a new Romulus and Remus) was designed to elevate Rome, along with her bishop, to prominence over the whole church. As pope, Damasus lived in personal pomp and luxury, and it was largely with him that popes in Rome began to live in the kind of palatial grandeur which would be expected of a monarch. Damasus moved in high society and hob-nobbed with the aristocratic and patrician ranks; he regarded his office of bishop as possessing noble stature worthy of high honor.

It was about the time Damasus was pope that bishops at Rome began to wear an episcopal dress which was a conscious attempt to imitate traditional senatorial garb. Under Damasus

29. Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom*, p. 114.

30. This account is taken mainly from Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, pp. 99-102.



the weekly Eucharist acquired an exalted ritual and formal ceremonial which came to dominate the worship service, for as with architecture and apparel, the external symbols of the worship service were beginning to take priority over the word of God. It is also from about this time that one begins to see “a spectacular explosion of colour in the vestments and hangings, the use of gold and silver vessels and elaborate marble piscinae, silver canopies over the altar, a multitude of wax candles, and an elaborate censuring with incense.”<sup>31</sup> And it was then that the practice began of erecting a screen, or iconostasis, in order to hide all the operations on the altar from the laity and thereby to emphasize the separation between clergy and laity.

Damasus is probably best remembered today for his having been the pope who, in 383, commissioned the Latin translation of the Scripture known to us as the Vulgate, and predominant in the West for centuries. It was his secretary, Jerome, the later famous *church father* and Hebrew scholar, whom he specifically entrusted with this responsibility. The Vulgate was to increase Roman authority and prestige in the West, for to translate means to *interpret*, and Rome’s stature would be vastly enhanced by the claim to have provided a Scripture which her own resources, granted by her founding apostles, could alone make possible. Accordingly, with Damasus Rome begins to intervene on a regular basis in the affairs of other Western churches. His letters “were written in the style of the imperial chancery.”<sup>32</sup> From this time Rome increasingly spoke with the voice of superior authority, as the mouthpiece of the apostle Peter to whom had been given the *keys* (authority) of the whole church, an authority not only over other churches, but even over church councils.

Perhaps the most celebrated of all those who occupied St. Peter’s see in late antiquity was Gregory the Great (Pope, 590–604). Some have seen in Gregory the first of the medieval popes, for he typified much that was characteristic of the later papacy. Gregory was in every respect an administrator. More than any

31. Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p. 102.

32. W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 628.

before him, he expanded the church bureaucracy in order to manage the affairs of the papal estates, known as the *patrimony of St. Peter*. As bishop, “we find him employing his considerable energies on such matters as horse-breeding, the slaughter of cattle, the administration of legacies, the accuracy of accounts, the level of rents and the price of leases. He took a direct part in the running of estates scattered throughout Italy, and in North Africa, Sardinia and Sicily.”<sup>33</sup> One wonders that he ever found time to preach and teach!

It was Gregory who organized the clergy into colleges (the basis of the Cardinalate) according to grade and required the wearing of clothes to befit each rank. He greatly expanded the business of the papal chancery and staffed it with scribes and letter-writers, for Gregory spent the bulk of his time corresponding with officials, bishops and abbots, and men responsible for the vast ecclesiastical estates. As Gregory was a descendent of one of the illustrious Roman patrician families, it would seem only natural that one of its offspring should carry on the honor of the family name and his class responsibility for the conduct of the *res publica*.

It is indisputable that Gregory was among the most influential voices to be taken as authoritative tradition throughout both the Carolingian period (9th–10th centuries) and the later High Middle Ages. Next to Augustine and the Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory clearly deserves mention as the most read and consulted of the *fathers* from whom guidance in the construction of the *Christian* centuries was sought. It is certainly with Gregory that the church at Rome was able to provide the degree of leadership needed to deal with the Germanic nations, then undertaking to settle down in the former Roman west, and to organize a program for their conversion to orthodox Christianity. The hope was that by such means the way would be opened to extending the authority of *Christian* Rome over that part of the Roman empire that had slipped out from under the control of the *secular* emperor whose residence had been, since Constantine, in Con-

33. Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, p. 133.

stantinople. The bishop of Rome was, by his day, the only Roman authority of any stature left in the west.

Gregory shared the Eusebian vision of the fusion of Rome with Christianity and all that that meant for the church and her clergy. In one important area, however, Gregory departed from the Eusebian formula. He no longer accepted the idea of the secular emperor as the *sole* head of the church. Two centuries of development, particularly since the emperors in the east were either too preoccupied with political problems or were incapable of providing assistance to the west, had left the leadership in the west increasingly in the hands of the bishop of Rome who, in many respects, assumed responsibility for high matters of state as well as for settling doctrinal issues in the churches. Naturally, this increased confidence in, and added to the ideological argument for, the primacy of Rome over the affairs of the church. It even provided support for an altered idea of authority over the total society. No longer should the *Ecclesia Universalis* be viewed as having one head, but now the concept of *two* heads, or powers, began to take hold. Even so, one must take precedence over the other. The church was beginning to think of a *priestly* authority as the *highest* authority in Christendom.

Nearly a century before Gregory, Gelasius (Pope, 492–96) had sought to articulate what was to become famous as the “doctrine of the two powers.” On the one hand, there stood the *heavenly* power represented by the clergy, especially the bishop of Rome; on the other hand, there was the *earthly* or *temporal* power which rested on the secular emperor and the officials who served him to protect the empire and the church from enemies without and within, especially heretics. In this way the activities of those who have high positions in the church would be properly delimited as to their rightful jurisdiction. However, Gelasius did not have in mind some irreconcilable dualism – he thought in terms of *hierarchy*. By claiming a duality of spheres, he was in fact attempting to define a whole new system of rule for the *Ecclesia Universalis*, that of the primacy of the priestly order over the whole society, and the primacy of the bishop of Rome, especially, as the true monarch or emperor. Accordingly, he wrote to

the emperor Anastasius as follows:

...Two there are, august emperor, by which this world is chiefly ruled, the sacred authority of the priesthood and the royal power. Of these the responsibility of the priests is more weighty in so far as they will answer for the kings of men themselves at the divine judgment...who have charge of divine affairs.... And if the hearts of the faithful should be submitted to all priests in general who rightly administer divine things, how much more should assent be given to the bishop of that see [Rome] which the most High wished to be pre-eminent over all priests....<sup>34</sup>

He went on to make the claim that the two powers necessarily accord with two realms of affairs: the temporal realm, which is the business of the royal power, and that having to do with *divine* matters, the prerogative of the priestly class. Neither should interfere in the business of the other, except when it is necessary, of course, to bring superior divine authority to bear on the conduct of princes by those given the chief responsibility in these matters, namely, the priests.

Salvation matters and *spiritual* concerns, on the one hand, were being divorced from this temporal world and from any Biblical kingdom agenda. On the other hand, by the claim that divine matters were spiritual concerns, and hence matters for the priestly class, the way was opened to a divine authority that would be exercised less as a Biblical authority and more as that which served to advance the interests of the clerical order and the pope. A Manichean dualism long distorted the concept of the church together with the type of Christian society ideal that accompanied it, and was the principal cause of a power struggle at the center of further civilizational development.

This Gelasian theory of the *two powers* became, in fact, the doctrine of the church, a doctrine based upon a presumed divi-

34. A segment of Gelasius's letter can be found in Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church & State, 1050-1300*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 13, 14.

sion of jurisdictions over the whole world, and indicating what class of elites was accorded rulership responsibility. More than this, it pointed to that person who in particular held from God supreme imperial authority and to him who had absolute power over the entire *Ecclesia Universalis*.

With Gelasius's theory itself, however, a certain ambiguity was present. For the so-called distinction between temporal affairs for which the royal or secular power was responsible and divine matters which belonged only to the clergy would inevitably cause confusion and confrontation. After all, the distinctions themselves derived from a God-ordained order for the world. Would they not *both* belong to divine matters? Would they not both need to be brought together at some higher level in order to maintain the *unity* of God's Ecclesia? Theory needed a way to harmonize what clearly seemed irreconcilable.

In Gelasius's mind, as in that of all bishops at Rome especially, there was little doubt that unless one monarch ruled over all aspects of the *Ecclesia Universalis* then a conflict could not be avoided between the sacred and the secular realms of life. Since God rules over all in heaven, his designated monarch must have complete authority over both dimensions on earth. And since the sacred is clearly of greater worth than the secular – because sacred things belong to the *eternal* realm, whereas earthly matters, while of some importance here and now, must eventually pass away – therefore, the chief power and authority under God on earth must be the bishop of Rome, the heritage of St. Peter to whom had been given the *keys*. The pope, then, must be the supreme power and authority on earth for all matters that pertain to the *Societas Christianae*. He alone must rule the temporal as well as the sacred realm.

The history of the church up to the High Middle Ages was a long and intense struggle to realize the goal of this papal and clerical vision of power and authority. It was not easy, for all that the church (i.e., the clerical order) had to fight with were *words*, whereas the secular arm of society had *real* arms and just as exalted a view of its own prerogatives in the total Christian society as that of the priestly class. But the highly trained and vastly

better educated clergy's words proved to be extraordinarily effective, particularly when ignorant and credulous multitudes were superstitiously persuaded that such words, coming as they did from such divinely elevated personages, possessed the power either to *cast into hell* or to *open the gates of heaven*. The clergy had done a masterful job of convincing many that it, and it alone, had been given a divine dispensation to absolve sins or to exercise a final judgment upon them. It soon convinced many that the only security for their souls lay in absolute, unqualified, and unquestioned obedience to the clergy, and especially the pope.

The Gelasian doctrine led eventually, over a rough and difficult terrain – for the bringing of the secular world of kings and emperors to submit to such papal overlordship was hardly to be expected without fierce resistance – to the twelfth century doctrine of the *plenitudo potestatis* – the *fullness of power* – of the pope. This doctrine claimed that in the pope alone resided all law and justice which came to him as God's vice-regent on earth, and to no other. He therefore “rules and disposes of all things, orders and governs everything solely as he pleases.... He can deprive anyone of his right, as it pleases him... for with him his will is right and reason; whatever pleases him has the force of law.”<sup>35</sup> At that point the popes no longer thought of themselves as the *vicar of St. Peter*, they were now the *vicar of Christ*. Their authority on earth was total and direct. Scripture was only useful for what it could provide in the way of support for this exalted ideology of power.

35. Friederich Heer, *The Medieval World: Europe 1100–1350*, trans. Janet Sondheimer, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962). p. 275

## 5 • *The University and Scholasticism* *The “Reason” Ideal*

Men in the Middle Ages were accustomed to looking at life in terms of distinct categories or classifications. Everyone and everything, it seemed, must belong in the proper place, fit the proper rank, and behave according to the proper function. Only when the world appeared in its correct arrangements could medieval men be confident that everything was as it should be. Each man has his ordained place and purpose and the responsibility not to violate God’s design and order. At the same time, medieval men longed passionately to see the unity of all things. While life must divide into several compartments, they accepted that these distinctions ought to be somehow joined at a *higher* level, where the antagonisms so apparent in politics and society throughout much of this period could be overcome and a more basic harmony be realized.

The most serious conflict resulted, as already indicated, from the partition into *Sacerdotium* on the one hand and *Regnum* or *Imperium* on the other; that is, from the difference that was posited to exist between things *spiritual* and things *temporal*. In the Middle Ages this drive for unity of the separate and opposite categories was fought out as a struggle over authority. Which *side* of the *church* had been granted the highest authority, the power to rule over the entire Christian Society? On the sacred or spiritual side stood the clerical aristocracy led by the vicar of St. Peter, the pope in Rome; on the secular or temporal side was the lay aristocracy, the knights and barons who, theoretically at least, were subject to the king or emperor as their supreme authority. Ideologically it was not an even fight. Although kings and emperors might claim the status of the Lord’s *anointed*, because they were not only crowned but consecrated with holy chrism, they were not qualified to perform such rites upon themselves; they must receive their *ordination* to office from hands more sacred, more blessed, than theirs could

ever hope to be. Only the clergy could anoint lay rulers. The pope in particular claimed this prerogative, which thereby elevated him above all sacred and lay power. If the pope was higher than the emperor, should not the unity of society be centered in the pope? Should we not look for the harmony between Sacerdotium and Imperium in a hierarchical relationship between the two? This was the theory, if not always the reality.

Although Western medieval society was principally dominated by a struggle for control between clerical and lay orders, it became complicated by the emergence of a *third* order – the *Studium*, what has been termed the *university*.<sup>1</sup>

It may seem strange to speak of the university as a new order coming to exist along side that of the previous two orders, for was not the university made up largely of clerics? Even though the university would in time become the breeding ground for that new civil official, the trained lawyer, whose chief responsibility was to serve the needs of the new *secular* state that was also beginning to emerge in the late Middle Ages, did not the university and the curriculum of learning remain largely an instrument of the church? Should we not think of it as primarily promoted by the church in order to provide the learning necessary to qualify candidates for high office in the clerical order?

With education in the Middle Ages limited to a narrow curriculum of study when compared with that of today, and with theology the dominant subject, it might seem valid to conclude that the university was an aspect of the clerical world, a sub-section of the Sacerdotium. But this is only partly true, for the *Studium* came to represent an entirely new order the center of whose intellectual vision would chart the course of Western history out of the Middle Ages and in the direction of the *humanist* Renaissance and Enlightenment. Although it was initially closely associated with Christianity and the Church, the university generated a mentality increasingly hostile towards the Church and

1. "The universities came to form in effect a third public force, standing beside the ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies." Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 284.



the rule of the Sacerdotium. In time, it supplied the ideological support for a new secular ideal – *reason* as man’s highest order.

The university as it exists today is a medieval invention. “In its final perfection,” writes David Knowles, “it was to be one of the most important original contributions that the medieval centuries made to the civilized life of Europe, and it has proved one of the most valuable of legacies left to modern times by the medieval past. For the University, in the sense of that word now current, was wholly a medieval creation.”<sup>2</sup> Although some have thought it possible to trace the origins of the university as far back as Plato’s Academy or Aristotle’s Lyceum, there was actually very little similarity between the university as it gradually took shape in the Middle Ages and the methods of learning employed in the classical Greek past. The ancient world knew nothing of an organized body of certified masters and students who engaged in a course of instruction that led, by a long and searching process of examination, towards a degree which admitted one to privileges within a carefully guarded corporation or which opened doors to greater professional opportunities. This was the product of the age of the guilds – the Middle Ages.

The university in the Middle Ages reflected medieval man’s passion for embodying his ideals in institutional form. Everywhere, in trade or commerce, arts or crafts, on the land or in the cloister, men were setting up structures to give durability and permanence to their cultural efforts. This was, in part at least, a legacy of the Christian belief that civilization advances by organized effort and careful construction. But it sprang just as much from a fear of competition and a desire for protection against the encroachments of others. According to the prevailing outlook, the world was inevitably a threat to life and goods. Men were wont to organize around some common interest, to form a guild to prevent others from poaching on their domain. The guild mentality is at heart a cartel mentality. Learning, knowledge, and education – the properties of the mind – were just as likely to become a closely guarded preserve of an elite few.<sup>3</sup>

2. David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 159.

Whatever the word *Studium* might connote in late Medieval culture, the educational ideal that it came to represent was not meant to benefit an expanding populace, but only a privileged small number.

The rise of the university was, in a sense, accidental. It sprang up as an offshoot of the intellectual revolution of the twelfth century, a consequence of the new scholastic culture in the realm of learning. This cultural development represented a new confidence in the mind of man to reason about everything in his experience, not only to understand himself and his world but God as well by the mere instrument of his logic. It was nothing less than the urge to explain *everything* by means of an inherent intellectual *power* which would provide man with a rational comprehension of all there is to know. Scholasticism is a mark of the beginning of Western man's attempt to turn back from an unduly mystical contemplation of, and preoccupation with, that other *spiritual* world to a greater immediate concern with and appreciation for this one. To a great extent, it was done under a dominant Christian impulse, yet because the instruments employed for this end were taken from the non-Christian world of thought, from Aristotle especially, it would eventually have the effect of splitting man's world into opposing realms of nature (knowledge) and grace (faith). In time, even the traditional authority of Scripture, to the extent it was seen as applicable to life, would recede before a new secular ideal by which man, from the resources of his reason alone, would seek to build his world. Reason independent of revelation would come to represent the new authority in the modern world.

It is important to ask, however, whether the idea of learning and knowledge in the Christian West was ever wholly founded upon an exclusively Scriptural basis. Was it not infected

3. "Among the aims of these corporations were self-government and monopoly – which amount to control of the teaching enterprise." David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 B.C. to A.D. 1450*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 208.

with non-Christian assumptions from the beginning? Much that passed for learning in the centuries that followed after the apostles and the early church was a combination of Scripture and Greek philosophical speculation. Scholasticism, which sought to synthesize Christian truth with the pagan Greek mind, was far from initiating the type of intellectual endeavor that dominated its agenda. The infection of Christian thinking with non-Christian presuppositions was not something that suddenly cropped up in the High Middle Ages; it can be seen lurking in the inner assumptions of learning long before this time. Scholasticism was the long working out of these disparate points of view at a time when men had regained confidence in man's ability to bring order into their world by the power of the mind.

*I> Purge of the Mind – Ascent of the Soul*

From its beginning Christianity was an *intellectual* religion, for it was supremely a religion of the Book – the Scriptures. Rather than a religion of mystical release or semi-philosophical introspection, it was founded upon the words of God *written*. Knowledge and understanding of the written word of God was an indispensable requirement for becoming a Christian and living according to the faith which set one apart from all other religious points of view. Christianity could not exist in a context of utter barbarity, where reading or writing were virtually non-existent. Some measure of literate culture was an unavoidable necessity. Always, then, the first order of business whenever and wherever early Christian missionaries penetrated heathen lands where no knowledge of letters was available was the translation of the Scriptures and the organization of methods of teaching reading and writing.

Since any book religion requires the application of the mind to the study of its content, in time a system of *doctrine* is built up. The transmission of Christianity to new generations of converts, or to sons and daughters of earlier converts, would require them to have some knowledge not only of the essential

contents of Scripture but of this system of doctrine as well. To believe the gospel came to mean more than simply accepting some facts about what Jesus said or did while on earth, it would also involve some knowledge of who Jesus is and the nature of his relationship to God. Moreover, one needed to understand how men could be saved by this Jesus, that is, how salvation was appropriated, what it involved as a way of life, and why Christianity's explanation was unique in these respects. More was involved, but the point is that much was needed to be taught and learned, efforts that would require the application of intellect.

Christianity was a religion of truth; it was also a religion which demanded a new obedience. Not only was it necessary to know the way of salvation, but Christianity required a moral transformation as well. The moral behavior it proclaimed was formulated in rules and regulations which new converts would then be required to learn. Naturally, these, too, would be recorded in literary form so as to insure universal recognition and acceptance.

Christianity was bound to attract opponents, sometimes from other religious viewpoints, but also from those who accepted some of its features but perverted its doctrines. Thus, an apologetics against false religions and heresies would add still more thought-content to be learned. Christianity spread in the early centuries not only in a spatial and geographical sense, but it also grew as a body of ideas and teachings.

Because Christianity was an intellectual religion, teaching its truths raises the question of the need for schools in order to instruct future generations. In this respect Marrou has offered an important, if perhaps somewhat debatable, observation: "One would have expected the early Christians, who were adamant in their determination to break with a pagan world that they were constantly upbraiding for its errors and defects, to develop their own religious types of schools as something quite separate from the classical pagan school. But this, surprisingly, they did not do...." This was primarily true of the Greco-Latin cultural world in which Christianity first dawned. There Christians encountered

a strong educational tradition already long in existence that proved difficult to supplant or discredit. “Never throughout the whole of antiquity,” Marrou goes on to say, “except for a few particular cases, did Christians set up their own special schools. They simply added their own specifically religious kind of training...on to the classical teaching that they received along with their non-Christian fellows in the established schools.”<sup>4</sup> Knowles makes a similar claim:

The Christian Church in the West was for long recruited principally from the lower, unleisured strata of society. When in the fourth century it began to win the educated classes there was no opposition or rival system to the old Roman primary education based on grammar and the classics. Christian children attended the schools of non-Christian masters, while Christian masters taught all comers according to the old curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, when it came to the most important assumptions, such as how, or in terms of what, the mind should be educated, or what presuppositions should control man’s view of himself and his purpose in the world, many Christians seemed not to have been especially disturbed by what the established pagan schools taught and whether or not they would undermine the doctrines of Christianity in those respects. They did not entirely grasp that no neutrality was possible between pagans and Christians on the fundamental ideas of man, the world, and the understanding of truth which the mind sought to comprehend.

Perhaps this indifference in the early Church may be explained by the evident fact, signified by many, that the Christian religion was thought of primarily as a matter of *personal* or *inner* salvation, which meant by and large a salvation of the *soul*. At the same time, its corollary was expressed in the goal of salvation which did not so much include the renewal of life here and now but the achievement of the after-life in heaven. Such a con-

4. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, pp. 422 & 424.

5. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 59.

cept of salvation naturally held little consequence for man's life in this world. It implied almost no connection to any cultural idea nor application to the management of life on this earth. These matters, if necessary, apparently could be safely learned from non-Christians. In much of Christian literature little was said of man's broader relationship to God, that he was created to be God's dominion servant and that all his culture and civilization were either products of submission to God or rebellion against God. That God was to be Lord over *all* man's life and that His redemption of man was meant to restore His rights as man's Lord in *all* areas of his life was neither fully nor firmly grasped. Thus, it was easy for Christians to assume that the culture in which they lived was legitimate and normal for Christians to adopt, and they accepted the category of "Hellenistic humanism as 'natural' and self-evident...."<sup>6</sup> This humanism, it was accepted, taught one how to be a man, and it was believed that one must first know how to be a *man* before he can become a Christian. As a result, Christians sought merely to graft a supernatural act of grace on to an already defined human nature.<sup>7</sup> From the beginning, a dualism took root in Christian thinking.

In a telling comment Knowles indicates what this dualism meant for Christianity in its history both in the period of Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages:

Christianity, in its origins and pre-history, had little kinship with Greece, but what we call Christendom, for more than a thousand years from the conversion of the emperor Constantine, was almost exclusively a society of peoples deriving their intellectual discipline and the habits of reasoning directly or indirectly from the Greco-Roman culture of the ancient world. It would consequently be scarcely an exaggeration to say that the philosophy of Christendom in those centuries is so deeply impregnated with the methods and ideas of Greek thought, and with the doctrines of non-Christian and more particularly of

6. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, p. 425.

7. Marrou, pp. 425 & 426.

pre-Christian philosophers, as to be in a very real sense a direct extension or prolongation of ancient philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

Here we approach the essence of the matter. Christianity developed on the foundation of the “habits of reasoning” and “the methods and ideas of Greek thought” which were supplied to her by the culture in which she grew up. This created enormous tensions, for Christianity and this pagan culture were deeply at odds, not simply due to the fact that this classical world of thought was a product of the old polytheism and Christianity was monotheistic, but because they had contradicting explanations on just about everything, most especially the claims to possess solutions to the problem of human existence.<sup>9</sup> For Hellenistic man the solution to man was to be found in becoming cultured and learned, to triumph over barbarism and ignorance. The cultivation of mind and the achievement of *sacred* philosophy were the means to overcome the debilitating influence of matter and the body which were responsible for producing personal and social disorder. The Greeks, as we discussed earlier, believed that man – at least certain elite men – could truly rise to the level of divinity, that mind, although hindered somewhat by matter, was not basically corrupted or sinful as the Christians maintained (or ought to have). Man’s problems were within man’s capability to manage, and his *reason* could act as a reliable guide in his endeavor to achieve true humanity in culture and civilization. How is it, we may wonder, that so many in the early church were thus attracted to Greek ideas and teaching?

On the one hand, because Christianity knew itself to be different from pagan culture and since no culture existed but the pagan one which surrounded it, and Christians failed to recognize they had one to offer themselves, it was easy to take the view that culture as such was evil, the only real alternative being to retreat into Monasticism as the denial of culture *per se*. On the other hand, a large number maintained contact with the world, but in so doing did not ask how or whether a specifically Chris-

8. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 3.

9. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, p. 426.

tian idea of culture could be possible. Most accepted the Greek definition as far as it was conceivable to do so without severing connection to Christianity altogether. As a result, Christians did not altogether remove their children from pagan schools nor insist that the classical heritage compromised the essential nature of the Christian religion. A Christian upbringing was merely superimposed upon a humanistic education. This meant that the intellectual faith of Christianity was early and pervasively suffused with non-Christian assumptions, and the significance of this condition for the rise of scholasticism and the university should soon become apparent.

Throughout the early Middle Ages – certainly from about 600 up to the twelfth century *renaissance* – the figure who most influenced the definition of Christian learning was Augustine. In the words of R.W. Southern, “The most comprehensive syllabus of Christian studies which was available to scholars at the end of the tenth century was the plan sketched by St. Augustine in his treatise on Christian learning, *De Doctrina Christiana*.”<sup>10</sup> Two others who helped to shape the educational ideal, if to a somewhat lesser extent, were Origen, whom we have already mentioned, and Boethius whom we shall briefly mention later. Augustine’s imprint was more deeply etched than any other, chiefly because his works were more readily available, but also because Augustine, who was a greater systematic thinker than any other, endeavored to integrate the Christian faith with the present world to which the Christian, he rightly believed, somehow belonged. However, as we also mentioned, Augustine’s legacy would long act as a prop to the Monastic ideal of culture and thus to an ideal of learning and knowledge that meant little beyond the framing of speculations and metaphysical abstractions for the sake of pious contemplation and devotional exercises. His conception of learning did involve genuine intellectual activity, for Augustine understood that no advance in the faith was truly possible without real understanding of its content. Yet,

10. R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 170 & 171.



Augustine intuitively clung to the Greek definition that man was essentially rational in his nature; using this understanding as the image of God in man he would then define the cultivation of the intellect as the noblest of all tasks for Christian men.

For Augustine the primary goal of Christian learning was to know the Scriptures. It was no simple matter, for faith required long and painstaking effort to understand that which it professed to be true and believed to be man's highest good. More importantly, Augustine did not believe that the knowledge of Scripture was an end in itself, rather it was the means to attain to a knowledge of what the heart of man deeply thirsts for, namely, to know God the Trinity as the author and founder of the universe and He Who cares for His creatures through the truth.<sup>11</sup> Yet, what is of interest to us, and what influenced the idea of learning for so long in medieval man's outlook, is what, in Augustine's mind, constituted the process by which knowledge of the truth is acquired as well as what it meant concretely for Christian activity in the world. In both respects, Augustine showed himself vulnerable to non-Christian notions.

In the first place, that process by which we might hope to arrive at the knowledge of the truth Augustine characterized as a *journey* or *voyage*. Specifically, it was a journey by which the mind is *cleansed* or *purged* of anything that prevents the soul of man from seeing the immutable light of God. Man is described as having wandered far from God, a characterization depicted by means of a geographical analogy called man's "native country." If he would know the truth which is God and enjoy the blessedness of Him Who lives immutably, man must leave behind his changeable world and return to his spiritual home-land. Such a process was, if anything, a type of *ascent* of the soul from the material present which weighs man down to that realm of eternal contemplation of God and His truth.

Augustine did not hesitate to say of *temporal* things that

11. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958), p. 13.

they are such that we should “run through them quickly that we may be worthy to approach and to reach Him who freed our nature from temporal things....”<sup>12</sup> This was the essence of the matter for Augustine when it came to the idea of Christian learning. The Christian’s chief responsibility was to undergo an intellectual process of purging his mind of the influences of this temporal world so that he might ascend to God. According to Augustine this was achieved principally by means of the study of the Scripture which he took to be superior to mere ascetic withdrawal. Still, it would seem, learning the Scripture did not mean that we were studying God’s kingdom agenda for man *in* this world, nor from it did we learn to know God by knowing His will for all areas of life. The study of Scripture for Augustine and for early medieval men was intended more to erase man’s connection to this world and to teach him primarily how to achieve the next than it was to teach him how to live and serve God in all aspects of life in this world. This program of education, therefore, did not have in mind a specifically Christian idea of civilization which was to be proclaimed and inculcated. It was intended for purely personal and internal soul-building.

We have seen and mentioned repeatedly that Neoplatonic thinking, ancient pagan man’s last attempt to retain his grip on the control of culture and civilization, had pervaded Christian thought. It continued to shape the outlook of Christianity throughout the Middle Ages, for, as Knowles rightly avers, “Neoplatonism... appears throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages as the principal ingredient of Christian philosophical thought and theological speculation.”<sup>13</sup> In the context of education it invaded the West largely through Augustine whose thinking had been early influenced by many of its assumptions. In Neoplatonism, as we saw, the great problem for man was matter, especially the body. The body was viewed as a drag on the spirit or soul and the cause of evil in the world. The chief purpose of man was to free himself from the entanglements of the

12. *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 30

13. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 28.

body and of the material world around him. He must ascend to the home of spirit in the great cosmic Spirit above all change and flux. This was achieved essentially by great intellectual discipline and purification of the mind from thoughts that distract man from contemplating eternal verities. What made Neoplatonism appealing was its accent upon the mind and the reason. It offered the hope of philosophical certainty and a rational satisfaction which could neither be affected nor controverted by the movement of time and things.

While Augustine played down the disparagement of the body as the source of evil, nevertheless he did appreciate the concept of learning as one which essentially involved purging the mind of temporal things and of the soul ascending intellectually to God in order to contemplate His Being and Truth. And though he centered the achievement of knowledge on the study of Scripture, he did not sufficiently grasp its covenantal purpose for the entire life of man in God's world.

In the second place, because his program was genuinely intellectual Augustine was compelled to take the whole realm of learning into account in order to explain how Christians ought to acquire the mental tools they needed even to gain the truth of God. But that realm of learning was controlled by the pagan consciousness, for the classical world had defined the problems to be studied as well as the methods that were to be employed in thinking about them. They had already stipulated what were the *sciences*. How to absorb their achievements without becoming deceived by their agenda was the issue to be resolved. Augustine had to struggle against positing a dualistic outlook, because for him truth must be one and unified. There could not be truth as taught by pagans and another taught by Scripture. It was his undoubted conviction, therefore, that "every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's."<sup>14</sup> Still, it cannot be said that Augustine succeeded in overcoming this problematic dualism for the basic reason that

14. *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 54.

he never found a sufficient point of integration for all of life in God's word.

Thus, he maintained that among the things of life some are there to be *enjoyed*, while others are merely to be *used*. "Those things which are to be used help and, as it were, sustain us as we move toward blessedness in order that we may gain and cling to those things which make us blessed."<sup>15</sup> On what Scriptural basis did he introduce these distinctions? How does the Scripture define the *useful*? And why posit a difference between things to be merely used and other things to be enjoyed? And why should blessedness lie beyond the things that are either used or enjoyed, even though these might assist one to arrive at that goal? Augustine cannot be said to have provided any Biblical explanation for his assertion.

One thing is certain: among the things that Augustine deemed *useful* was the whole realm of the sciences known to the pagan world. His intention was to find their *use* for a Christian curriculum. Scripture, after all, required interpreting, and the task of interpretation was no simple matter, but a *scientific* endeavor. It was a difficult job searching the mysteries of the faith; the best equipment was needed. Augustine found that equipment available in the pagan method of intellectual training. He saw its use as an *ancillary* preparation for studying the truths and doctrines of Scripture. As Knowles states, "he desires to explain and interpret the nature of God and of the soul with all the means at his command, whether he finds help in philosophers of the past, and in the Scriptures and teachings of the Church, or whether he presents the results of his own reasoning and religious experience."<sup>16</sup> This pagan science and learning, however, was acceptable so long as it remained merely in the category of the *useful*, and did not pretend to lead to the blessed life. Still, he allowed, in its proper place its usefulness was undoubted.

Thus, from the start there was always a loose connection

15. *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 9

16. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 33.

between *divine* and *secular* learning. So long as man's essential religious purpose was one of escape from this world, the pagan world of thought as an acceptable explanation of man and his world would be kept in subordination to divine learning. But when men became more earnest about this world, as began to occur in the late eleventh century, eventually the secular world of thought would not be content to play the role of the merely ancillary or useful to that with which it had no intrinsic connection. If Christians could not integrate the *useful* and the *blessed* on a strictly Scriptural basis, then any attempt to combine the non-Christian *useful* with the Christian *blessed* would eventually show the Scriptures to be lacking in all that man needed in order for him to be truly man and the world to be a legitimate realm for his endeavors. These he would increasingly find from non-Christian thought, pushing Scripture and its *spiritual* agenda from the center to the periphery of culture and civilization.

In the concept of learning that was to take shape in the Middle Ages, Origen's importance is second only to that of Augustine. His primary contribution lay in the method of interpreting Scripture and the *ends* for which Scripture ought to be studied. Beryl Smalley offers here an appropriate summary: "Scripture for him [Origen] was a mirror, which reflected the divinity now darkly, now brightly; it had body, soul, and spirit, a literal, moral, and allegorical sense, the first two for 'simple believers' who were 'unable to understand profounder meanings', the third for the initiates, the Christian gnostics, who were able to investigate *the wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom of God*."<sup>17</sup> Thus, learning was determined by the capacity one had for penetrating into the supra-rational mysteries of God, apparently a capability limited to a select few. Not only that, but those who could benefit from such *insights* need not concern themselves with whether or not they should seek to inculcate a similar understanding among the mass of believers in order to build up a common Christian enterprise, for the *average* believer was not

17. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), pp. 8 & 9.

capable of receiving such knowledge limited as it was to those who not only had the inclinations to study them but the requisite training to appreciate their obviously esoteric quality. The effect was to promote an elitism in the realm of knowledge, a development that would preclude any covenantal/civilizational understanding of truth. It would also aid the growth of mere credulity among the masses as they would not be expected to understand Scripture on anything other than a simplistic level, consequently making them easy prey to control by those with power, especially the clerical aristocracy in whose hands all learning would become a guarded preserve. As with the Greeks, medieval Christian learning would foster a distinct social attitude, namely, the notion of culture and civilization as something from which only a privileged few could or should possibly benefit. "The educated," comments Murray, "were an elite, set above the herd of ordinary men."<sup>18</sup>

## 2> *The Age of "Faith"*

With the passing of Late Antiquity we move into the early and central Middle Ages. Historians have sometimes defined these centuries – from approximately 600 to 1050 AD – as the Age of Faith. Often they have thought that this was the quintessential time in history when men believed unquestioningly in God, when faith and religious phenomena of all kinds were the great preoccupations of Western man. The term *age of faith* separates an era of pious credulity from the present time when men no longer give credence to myths and fables, when science and knowledge have liberated us from superstition and the need to seek solace in withdrawal and other-worldly contemplation. The accent on the word *faith* as depicted by modern historians tends to fall upon the inner man, upon his subjective disposition, and they are apt to regard the object of medieval man's faith as something unworthy of consideration.

18. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, p. 241.

While this portrayal is to some extent true, it is not entirely accurate. For the term *age of faith* ought not to emphasize the act of believing as an inner experience so much as faith primarily "in the sense of that which is believed. A synonym for such 'faith' would be 'doctrine'...."<sup>19</sup> The Middle Ages as an age of faith, then, was an age of doctrine as a body of thought which men were taught to believe and not to question. It was especially a time when Christian doctrine became set by the authority of tradition and was upheld by the consensus of the orthodox teachers of the church. What men believed was the *catholic* faith, as it was the one and universal or catholic church in which true doctrine had been delivered once and for all and had been transmitted by apostolic tradition.<sup>20</sup> The age of faith was synonymous with the age of the church, an age when loyalty to the truth would be seen as indistinguishable from loyalty to apostolic tradition as this was embodied in the councils and fathers of the church. The church, through her clerical, especially pontifical, office holders, maintained a complete control over the subject matter of learning and knowledge. This being so, all learning not only became a matter of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, it was fostered only to the extent that it served ecclesiastical interests.

As mentioned, the chief architect of this church-dominated idea of learning, at least initially, was Augustine. He was considered to be the father of the church's doctrine *par excellence*. This meant that his idea of learning, the nature of which first required preparatory study of the non-Christian classical methodology of thought to be completed by applying its technique to the content of the Scripture, came to be the accepted practice in the church. But it also meant that the church adopted Origen's idea of one kind of knowledge for the elites and another kind for the simple believers. A third person left his legacy upon church-controlled education in the Middle Ages, namely, Boethius (c. 480–524) whose importance lies upper-

19. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 4.

20. Pelikan, p. 6.

most in his great skill as a translator and preserver of much of the classical heritage that the medieval world possessed. In particular, "Boethius was the first to apply Aristotelian methods to theological problems and to the elucidation of dogmatic statements."<sup>21</sup> Very quickly, then, Aristotle's syllogistic approach became chiefly responsible for the way questions and problems were to become formulated and resolved.

While it was Aristotle who first fascinated medieval men with the power of reason, the metaphysics, that is, the conceptual content, came essentially from Augustine. As long as this was so, the rational methodology of Aristotle was kept subordinate to the Christian control of culture. But when in the twelfth century the remaining corpus of Aristotle was introduced, including especially his metaphysics, then the Christian outlook, which was in truth a church outlook, began to crumble. The intellectuals and scholars of the thirteenth century who fully embraced the complete Aristotelian system as the essence of Christian truth could not be aware of how far they had moved Christian thought away from its Augustinian presuppositions. What they did, however, in inheriting the whole corpus of Aristotelian ideas was "to erect a system of thought covering the whole of human experience without reference to the truths of faith...[a] development...greatly assisted by the contemporary tendency amongst theologians to separate the spheres of nature and grace, of reason and revelation."<sup>22</sup>

Aristotle's logic, along with the system of doctrine of the church fathers, particularly Augustine, had been the main subject of intellectual development throughout much of the early and central Middle Ages. And as Augustine's mind had been influenced by the metaphysics of Neoplatonism, the primary purpose of medieval study, using Aristotelian logical categories, was to give *ascent of the soul* and the *purge of the mind* a seemingly scientific or rational grounding. As long as men believed that the purpose of the Christian life was to escape materiality, the use of

21. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 48.

22. Knowles, p. 81.



Aristotelian logic only served to give that goal a rational basis, and would always remain in a subservient and somewhat artificial role. But when medieval thought began to shift slowly away from this Monastic ideal, when belief in an exclusively non-material and non-bodily end to life began to be doubted, Aristotle's philosophical method would suddenly become the means to achieve independence for human thought which would eventually replace the church's control of learning with the authority of autonomous reason.

The problem of the relationship between the *secular* Aristotelian logic and the supposedly Christian Neoplatonic metaphysics can perhaps be explained as the problem of trying to connect a view of life that had little room for the natural world as a realm of *Christian* activity, indeed as a place for man at all, with a system of rational investigation that could only view the realm of nature as all that was available for man to realize and perfect his humanity. In this period, so far as Christianity was concerned, the natural world had no intrinsic place in God's purpose for man; it was simply a means to a *spiritual* end. As Jonathan Riley-Smith has commented: "The natural world, itself miraculous since it stemmed from God's act of creation, was important only in so far as it gave men signs of what was in reality happening behind it, revealing to them the significance of these supernatural events. Nature was to be interpreted, not explained."<sup>23</sup> If learning and knowledge had any place in the Christian cultural ideal of this period it was to be able to *interpret* nature and the natural world, but with some loftier goal of disclosing its *spiritual* message. Aristotle was deemed useful in that he provided a mental instrument for engaging in that enterprise. His logic was employed for the sake of a *scientific* interpretation. But to *explain* nature so that Christians might be able to exercise *dominion* over it under God and so labor for His kingdom on earth (i.e., in the *natural* world) was not the primary purpose of

23. Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p. 11.

learning and education. Yet, by adopting the Aristotelian logic as the principal tool for the purposes of religious *interpretation*, the natural world would soon begin to intrude, but it would not be a natural world built from the outset upon a Scriptural viewpoint. When the medieval outlook shifted from one of interpretation to one of explanation the intellectual process would already be seen as having been cut loose from Scriptural authority.

The high point of the central Middle Ages, so far as the development of the Western school and idea of learning is concerned, was the so-called Carolingian Renaissance. Beginning with the *reforms* of Charlemagne in the early ninth century the next two and a half centuries saw the establishment and spread of schools and a fixed educational curriculum that in time would become the seeds of the universities of the High Middle Ages. Initially, it was in association with the monastic houses and the Monastic reform movement that schools emerged. Because for some time the monasteries were the chief seats and agents of education these centuries are generally referred to as the monastic or Benedictine centuries.<sup>24</sup> A few of the more famous monastic centers were St. Gall in France and Fulda and Reichenau in Germany. It was in these locations that the great collections of the classical past were gathered and copied. It was also here that the formation of a curriculum slowly took shape based primarily upon the study of letters and rhetoric. The goal of learning was to acquire the necessary skills for reading, writing and especially speaking, for the needs of the church were centered upon knowledge of the Scripture and the Latin Fathers with the capacity to teach and preach from them. The basic curriculum in this context became known as the *Trivium*, for it included three parts, grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. The latter, the portion having to do with dialectic, was the study of Boethius's Aristotle, but in the monastic context was of limited value.

A second type of school also made its appearance during these centuries – the so-called cathedral school. The cathedral schools were located at the great cathedral cities and were placed

24. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 70.

under the jurisdiction of the bishop. Among the most famous were Chartres, Tours, Rheims, Laon, and, of course, Paris. Here schools were established for the sake of educating the young clerks. Here, too, the principal course of study was Scripture and the Fathers. But it was in the cathedral schools that the great theological ideas were studied as well and consequently a greater need was felt for the development of the powers of reasoning in order to be able to comprehend the intricacies and nuances of those questions about God the Trinity and the person of Christ that had been on Christians' minds for centuries. Because a greater demand was placed upon the training of the intellectual faculty than in the monastic houses where the goal of learning was set more in the context of withdrawal, contemplation and *lectio divina*, or the reciting of Scripture and the Fathers, then naturally the tools for developing the mind, such as dialectic, took on a greater importance. Alongside were added studies in those areas also thought to be necessary for developing one's intellectual abilities – music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, the core courses of the *Quadrivium*, the second part of the medieval curriculum. Since the goal of this learning was to become theologically astute, the purpose of these courses was no more than means to that end. Still, they did require some comprehension of matters not primarily of *spiritual* value. In time they would begin to tantalize men's minds with ideas for their own sake, not necessarily for the sake of the church or the faith. They would encourage a new confidence in the faculty of reason to investigate problems and issues without reference to established orthodoxy or the church's accepted tradition.

During these centuries, but especially around the end of the tenth and early eleventh centuries, the study of dialectic or logic in the cathedral schools gained an enormous appeal. Students and intellectuals became increasingly fascinated with what they believed was the most important instrument for the organization and arrangement of the totality of man's experience. Here was a *power* in the mind of man to discover all truth, to rectify all injustices, to clarify all problems and resolve all dilemmas of man's existence in the world as well as his relationship to God

and eternity! Logic was viewed as a mental power capable of discovering order in what otherwise seemed like a confused world. Again, in the words of R.W. Southern, "The world of nature was chaotic – a playground of supernatural forces, demoniac and otherwise, over which the mind had no control. The world of politics was similarly disordered, intractable to thought." However, man would turn to logic as the means to confront this disorder, for it was passionately believed that "logic... opened a window on to an orderly and systematic view of the world and of man's mind."<sup>25</sup> Men were determined to place everything in its proper classification – genus, species, differentia, property, accident. Nothing must remain that could not be fit into its logical category – quantity, quality, relation, position, place, time, state, action and affection. Great amounts of time and mental energy were spent seeking to explain everything in terms of these systematic arrangements. The apparent beneficiary of all this systematizing was theology, that intellectual realm which, at first, seemed the least amenable to logical ordering. Here everything accepted as orthodox was precisely classified – seven deadly sins, seven sacraments, seven virtues, seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, not to mention the exact nature of the Trinity, the precise relationship between the Lord's body and blood in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and so forth. Nothing, it would seem, was examined but that it was not immediately transformed into a "chain of syllogisms."<sup>26</sup> More and more, however, the world of Aristotelian thought would displace that of Augustine at the center of the Christian idea of learning and knowledge in the Middle Ages. With it would emerge what scholars at present have referred to as *medieval humanism*. This was bound to occur when the study of logic led to the triumph of philosophy over the study of Scripture and the Fathers of the church.

25. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, pp. 179 & 180.

26. Southern, p. 182.

3> *The Triumph of Philosophy*

In the latter half of the eleventh century noticeable changes were beginning to make themselves felt in nearly every area of medieval life and society. In the first place, the period witnessed a considerable literary renaissance. Vast new quantities of previously unavailable materials had been brought to light, thereby stirring an eagerness in men's thinking to absorb new ideas and re-evaluate old ones. Secondly, and more importantly, that which contributed most to this literary revival was the rapid economic change taking place, stimulated as it was by renewed large-scale commercial activity and the burgeoning prosperity brought about by the growth of trade, especially with the Islamic east. Heretofore unimaginable wealth and opulence suddenly made their appearance in the urban centers which were also the locations of the cathedral schools. An accompanying feature of this new prosperity was a growth in the population, bringing about a natural increase in the number of youths eager to imbibe the new learning. But perhaps the most important change of all had to do with the new attitude that learned minds were beginning to entertain with respect to the powers of reason and logic. Everywhere a new confidence was being expressed, namely, that "there seemed no limits to the field which the human mind could master, and all arguments that were not strictly logical and formal seemed worthless."<sup>27</sup> Reason, employed under the spell of the *new* Aristotelian logic, became the new mistress and judge, acquiring a new authority.<sup>28</sup> Men were beginning to think that nothing lay beyond the capability of the mind to arrange or order by means of a total systematic rationality. From this sort of optimism would come the *Summa*, the complete compendium on all knowledge in any given field of thought. This desire for a complete organization of knowledge made the institutionalization of study in a university curriculum a growing necessity.

27. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 86.

28. The *new* Aristotelian logic derived from the recent discovery of the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle.

Along with Aristotle's logic a number of other factors also contributed to give rise to medieval *humanism*. Following Southern we may say that the emergence of humanism in the Middle Ages was the result of *three* symptoms. (1) From the concentration upon the Classical thinkers a new sense of the dignity of human nature began to appear – a new belief in the *nobility* of man despite his fallen state. It was accompanied by the belief that human nature was capable of development in this world and that man's reason was the principal instrument for his advancement. (2) It was closely accompanied by a new sense of the dignity of nature, a belief that "if man is by nature noble, the natural order itself, of which he forms part, must be noble" as well.<sup>29</sup> (3) These naturally led to a new sense of the importance of the natural and physical as over against the merely supernatural and spiritual. Medieval men began to regard the world here and now as intelligible and accessible to human reason and purpose, that nature was orderly and conducive to human endeavor and was not simply the means to a supernatural end. For the first time, it seemed, men were beginning to feel at home in this world and were no longer content to escape the realm of matter and view the body as an alien sphere. For a long time man's link with the *heavenly* realm alone provided order and dignity. Because of man's sinfulness he was the least dignified of creatures. Only through *religious* exercises (prayers, pilgrimages, penances, touching of relics) could he possibly hope to achieve any sense of purpose or order. While this link was not immediately broken it was beginning to be relegated to a mere part of what it means to be human. Nature was starting to emerge as a realm independent of Grace and Salvation.

Ironically, the monastic atmosphere itself did much to contribute to the new nature outlook that had emerged. One need not suppose that this refers to the monasteries exclusively. For Monasticism was much more than something practiced by a

29. The discussion of these matters is taken from a collection of essays by R.W. Southern entitled, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970). The quote is from one of the essays of that title, p. 31.

few, it was the very definition of Christianity, and all who sought inclusion in its world would have regarded a measure of monastic activity as necessary to its life and faith. Consequently, even among the clerics of the church, and in the cathedral schools, it is possible to find similar attitudes and tendencies.

One crucial factor in monastic thinking and behavior had been to concentrate intensely upon the soul, to seek for God in the *inner* self. This focus upon the *experience* of God and the supernatural could easily lead into speculation upon the inner workings of the consciousness and its relationship to its surroundings. Consequently, one of the influences of this monastic psychology of self-absorption was that it "seemed to show that men could find new truths of the greatest general importance simply by looking within themselves."<sup>30</sup> If man could find God in his soul, so it was thought, then man was a sufficient starting-point not only for *religious* truth but for truth in general. At the same time, the self-knowledge that was gained from this discovery was bound to produce a greater sense of self-importance or self-worth. Finally, if experience was an acceptable road to God, then experience might not be bad after all. Perhaps the practice of asceticism was not all that was normal for man.

In both the monastic and cathedral schools a new sense of community also took hold. In the context of learning men were given the opportunity to discuss and debate ideas and to compare points of view with one another. A critical spirit displayed itself in a new questioning of traditional dogma and standard church orthodoxy. Knowledge began to be seen not as something deposited once for all, but as a goal toward which one ought painstakingly to strive, as a quest to be pursued wherever reason might lead. The give-and-take of this new intellectual and social contact encouraged the belief that the knowledge available from experience was sufficient to become a standard of truth for broader societal concerns. Knowledge could be applied to the problems of society and need not be seen merely as a personal route to heaven. In fact, learning itself was a way to deal with the

30. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies*, p. 33.

effects of sin in all aspects of man's life, not simply a way to escape this world. However, the learning that inspired this belief was not the traditional theology but the new liberal arts. To be sure, theology remained the principal field of knowledge and learning in the Middle Ages, but it was coming to be increasingly believed that it was possible only with the aid of a propaedeutic, that one first needed a grounding in philosophy in order to advance to the knowledge of theology. Philosophy, of course, meant the Greeks, especially Aristotle!

At about this time – late eleventh and early twelfth century – a new type of man made his appearance on the medieval landscape. He has often been referred to as a *Goliard*, a “wandering clerk,” who, as an “escapee” from the cloister and the world of strict ecclesiastical control, migrated to the towns in search of the new learning.<sup>31</sup> His was a more worldly attitude, representing a new and restless spirit no longer satisfied with the world he knew and was coming to despise. He longed to break out of the cramped medieval world and saw in the new learning an opportunity for doing so. Le Goff describes him: “Those poor students who had no fixed home, who had no prebend, no stipend, thus set out on an intellectual adventure, following the master who pleased them at the moment, hastening toward the one currently in fashion, going from city to city to glean the teachings being offered at the moment.”<sup>32</sup> Apparently, these sorts could be found in increasingly larger numbers as the century progressed. It was because of these restless spirits and their thirst for learning that schools independent of the cathedrals also began to appear at this time, schools where the new intellectual problems concerning the soul and its relationship to the world of universals was strictly the subject of interest.

The Goliard was the anti-establishment figure of his day. No longer satisfied with a world imposed by the church and tradition, such men sought freedom in a new libertine attitude

31. For here and the comments to follow one should see Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan, (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 24–35.

32. Le Goff, p. 26.



towards customs, dogmas, and standards. They would seek emancipation from their bondage by means of a supposedly *intellectual* liberation. Many who were weary of the sterile world of theology and its vast assortment of esoteric queries found deliverance in a turn to nature and the senses. Specifically, they found release through poetry and song – many were traveling musicians, the *jongleur* or court troubadours, who sang the tunes and stoked the flames of the romantic ideals of knighthood and chivalry. Often in their music they dared to attack the representatives of the established order. They especially hated and despised that part of Christianity which had for so long “rejected the earth, which embraced solitude, asceticism, poverty, celibacy, and which could even be considered a renunciation of the fruits of the mind.”<sup>33</sup> They exhibited all the usual prejudices of the city against the countryside that upstart cultivated youth tend to show. That is, they loved nature, but disdained rural occupations and stigmatized the peasantry. They displayed the intellectual’s customary contempt for physical labor and exalted the mind as a thing of nobility. They wished to see in the mind and the reason a new and superior source of *natural* values. They looked to reason to produce a general system of morals free from the dictates of Church and Cloister.

We have mentioned these characters because the rise of scholasticism and the university would scarcely have been possible without them. Their attitudes and aspirations helped to shape an altogether new outlook on the world and man’s place in it. They inspired an independence from the old autocratic canons of thought and encouraged a new confidence in the powers of the human intellect to peer inside itself, there to discover the intrinsic powers necessary to understand and erect a world no longer fettered by indiscriminate, external authority. They would accept only a thinking about the world in which the mind, freed from all authority besides its own, was capable of organizing everything to its own satisfaction. The rise of scholastic philosophy was due not merely to a newly awakened intellectual curios-

33. Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, p. 32.

ity in response to a growing awareness of a fresh body of previously unheard ideas flooding into the West, but to a whole new mental and moral disposition stemming from a yearning to break with church-imposed dogma and the Monastic culture which controlled it. In this respect, authority meant *every* authority which hindered the mind's search for truth and knowledge on its own. Thus, even the authority of *revelation*, associated as it was with church and Monasticism, would no longer suffice to explain man and his world unless it, too, be subjected to the demands of logic and questioning. The Greeks and Aristotle had taught that more and perhaps *better* truths – certainly in the sense that they were more intellectually satisfying – were available. The Goliard was a man who saw in these the means to challenge, if not to escape, the static world in which he lived.

The most famous of these itinerant sophists, the man who would be called the founder of the scholastic methodology, was Abelard (d. 1142). His was a clever, self-assured young mind which exhibited all the usual impatience for those who could not, or would not, see intellectual problems on his level. Abelard was not merely a brilliant thinker, but a cantankerous disputer. It was a basic trait of his nature always to pick intellectual fights. While others went off on geographic crusades, Abelard spent his energies on intellectual ones. He saw himself as on a mission to found the basis of a new and liberated culture of the mind, and he could ill tolerate any who stood in his way. The world of his day had erected too many false and stupid idols which he believed it his duty to demolish. For too long the reasoning powers of the mind had lain in the clutches of dogmas, customs, habits and mysticism. His intent was to free reasoning from servitude and submission to theology, to enable it to soar to the realms of philosophy. For this reason Abelard has been called “the first great modern intellectual figure;” his outlook was closer to the modern Enlightenment than it was to the medieval world of thought.<sup>34</sup>

What Abelard's faith in humanism came to mean for the

34. Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, p. 35.

rise of scholasticism went much deeper than the desire simply to free thought from the institutional control of the church. His humanism stood for the belief that through reason man acquired a new freedom from God. His faith in the power of logic extended to the moral sphere where he came to represent the new, anti-Augustinian, moralism. For him, man was capable of achieving a true self-knowledge by his own inner lights, out of which he could discover the means by which it was "up to us to accept or reject the contempt for God which constitutes sin." Man has the power to choose or refuse the uprightness of the moral life. In Abelard's estimation, sin was nothing more than the failure to acquire the necessary knowledge by which to make a rational choice. His, and that of all subsequent scholastic thinkers, was an incipient Socinianism. And like those later rationalists, Abelard stood for a humanism that was the sum of human thought regardless of the differences of faith, mores, and traditions. "He aimed to discover the natural laws which, beyond religions, would enable one to recognize the son of God in all men."<sup>35</sup>

Prior to the rise of the school of Paris, Chartres was the preeminent center of the humanist revival. Scholars often speak of something they call the *Chartrian spirit*, a new outlook on learning bolstered by the influx and absorption of Greco-Arab knowledge. In the twelfth century, along with renewed contact between east and west, primarily with Constantinople, rediscoveries of long unknown classical materials, especially Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Ethics*, began to appear in the learning hungry West. Even more important were the interchanges taking place in Moorish Spain between Western scholars and Jewish scholars who possessed manuscripts of Arab commentators on Aristotle. A new world of ideas suddenly became available to thinkers in the cathedral schools as the result of this contact. No center of learning was more affected or transformed by this inflow than was the school at Chartres. It was here more than elsewhere that the new humanistic learning took hold. Students flocked to

35. Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, pp. 46 & 47.

Chartres eager to absorb the new philosophy of the Arabs and Aristotle.

The central concern of the Chartrian system of learning was to define man and his place in the new realm of nature. Nature did not exist simply to provide allegorical insights into the *spiritual* realm, but possessed its own legitimacy. More important, the key to nature was man, who has the means to unlock the secrets of nature; the world stands open to his reason and logical penetration. Nature was looked upon as a *cosmos* in and of itself. It was inherently rational and organized by a system of laws which the mind could study independent from the authority of revelation. For Chartrians, God was pushed beyond the realm of nature which He had created, but which He now respects as a semi-independent realm or order. In fact, as Le Goff states, "Chartrian rationalism was a belief in the all-powerfulness of Nature. For the Chartrian, Nature was first and foremost a life-giving power, perpetually creative, with inexhaustible resources, *mater generationis*."<sup>36</sup> This new secular outlook on nature bred a new man-centered activism, for man himself was a part of this new nature ideal. He was looked upon as having the natural ability to re-work and re-shape his world as he wished it to be. Man's purpose was no longer merely to contemplate heaven and God by means of nature, rather it was to work in the world as a place submissive to his will. The outcome of this attitude was to foster the notion that life, especially social life, was not something to be merely received from God. Instead, it was something that man was capable of molding for himself.

It might seem that this new nature outlook of medieval man represented a type of *Romantic* absorption in the senses and the feelings. However, this would be to misconstrue what nature meant in this medieval context. Nature was merely that realm of existence which stood over against the supernatural, the world of God, saints, and angels. It concerned the here and now and whether or not the material existence of man possessed any logic or reason other than to provide a place of pilgrimage to the next

36. Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, p. 50.

world. It should not be thought that men believed the material realm of nature to be somehow superior to the so-called spiritual realm. Their approach to questions of truth in the realm of nature was very much a matter of *idea* and not of *sensation* which was no source of knowledge whatsoever. Yet ideas were somehow connected to the things the mind receives by means of the senses. What was that connection, and how did the mind get beyond the merely sensed to the more certain understanding of the *universal* that lay hidden behind or beyond the material object? Here was introduced the great problem of the soul and of cognition that occupied thinkers and scholars nearly to the exclusion of all else.

The problem stemmed from medieval thinkers having accepted the Greek view which looked at matter and spirit as more or less antithetical. Moreover, spirit, as the essential nature of man, was equated with Mind. Man was primarily reason or intelligence. His greatest problem was to find a way to ascend from the flux of perceptual experience to the world of intelligences where understanding was no longer distracted by his material nature and the sensations of his body. Knowledge was only of the forms, the universals. How does the mind know these logical entities since man must make his first approach to them *via* sensation? Knowledge was looked upon as made possible by the *active* agency of the mind, whereas sense impressions were viewed as merely *passive*, as material that was inchoate until reworked in cognition. Medieval man, under the strong influence of Aristotle, did not wish to conceive of learning and knowledge as a merely *receptive* capacity, but as something over which the mind possessed *constructive* powers.

Framing the problem this way helped to open the door to a great distinction between the realms of *reason* and *revelation*. The human mind was bounded by the visible world to which it came in contact by the senses. Knowledge, however, was achievable by means of contact with the external world, for human reason was entirely capable of abstracting from the sense impressions which the external world makes upon us and thus of forming the conceptual content that is knowledge. In this world

of man's experience reason was adequate for grasping the truth of things, causes, and events. Revelation was reserved for those things of *faith* which the unaided reason could not grasp on its own. From this distinction arose what became known as the *double truth* theory: that something could be true in the realm of philosophy and nature which was entirely opposed to the truth in theology and grace, and vice versa.<sup>37</sup> The authority of reason was pitted against the authority of faith, yet somehow they formed a unity.

The thirteenth century was the high tide of the medieval synthesis. It was the century of Bonaventure, Albert the Great, and especially of Thomas Aquinas. Thomas, under the predominant influence of Aristotle, maintained "a resolute separation of the spheres of reason and revelation, the natural and the supernatural [and] recognized the autonomy of human reason in its own field...."<sup>38</sup> That is, "he accepted human reason as an adequate and self-sufficient instrument for attaining truth within the realm of man's natural experience" without any reference to faith.<sup>39</sup> Thomas believed that the order of reality was such that man's reason could know it without the need to submit to any authority but the power of reason itself. But, in fact, Thomas accepted Aristotle's explanation of that natural realm as authoritative. In effect, he gave support to the idea that reason in general was not affected by the power of sin and corruption, as Augustine had maintained; rather, he claimed that man possessed a "natural light" which enabled him to grasp fully the truth of the natural realm on its own, without need of the transforming power of Divine grace. In the words of Gilson, "From

37. For example, Aristotle taught the eternity of the world, which, in the realm of *natural* observation, was entirely philosophically acceptable. But, what was acceptable to *reasoned* analysis was unacceptable to the teachings of *faith* which asserted that God created the world and, thus, the world had a beginning in time and so was not eternal. However, since the things of reason and those of faith belong to different spheres, their contradiction need not be considered upsetting.

38. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 236.

39. Knowles, p. 239.

the time of St. Thomas we are henceforth in possession of a natural light, that of the active intellect...capable, on contact with sensible experience, of generating first principles, and, with the aid of these, it will gradually build up the system of the sciences."<sup>40</sup> With Thomas, it is believed possible to "reason from the existence of contingent beings and conclude to the existence of a necessary being."<sup>41</sup> In other words, one could arrive at a knowledge of God and divine things by a process of extrapolation from created things. Indeed, without doing so, no knowledge of God could be truly attained.

The thirteenth century was also the century in which the full-blown university began to make its appearance. The whole realm of academics and learning was coming to stand for the belief that the mind of man was free to pursue the *reason of things*, certainly in the realm of nature, to the exclusion of the authority of revelation. It looked to Aristotle, not Scripture, as the starting-point for the mind's investigation of problems and questions. But, however much thinkers like Thomas maintained a harmony between the things of reason and the things of revelation, the tendency was to push them farther and farther apart. No amount of optimism could prevent the triumph of philosophy over theology. So long as the new scholastic method, in which all traditional sources of knowledge were to be questioned, maintained control of the new brand of learning in the universities, all areas of knowledge would be dominated by the belief that reason was sufficient to pose problems and seek resolutions without reference to anything outside the mind of man. Nature was coming to be viewed as an autonomous, rational entity, which operates without interference according to its own principles or law.

By the late Middle Ages, Nominalism, in many ways the final form of scholasticism, would assert the notion that if anything could be truly known by the powers of the intellect, it was

40. Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), p. 140.

41. Gilson, p. 258.

limited to what the mind of man could discover by means of a combination of reasoning and perception alone. In other words, questions of God and His relationship to the creation, as well as the soul and matters of faith, were said to lie beyond the limits of reason. And what was beyond reason was beyond knowledge in the strict sense of the word. If one thought it possible to arrive at the truth of *natural* religion by means of the demonstrations of reason, then one was mistaken. Here one had only the intuitions of faith to go on. Reason must be left behind. Thus, for example, in speaking of Ockham, David Knowles writes; "The truths of 'natural' theology, which had formed the chains binding the dictates of reason to the declarations of revelation, melted into thin air. Neither the existence of God, nor the immortality of the soul, nor the essential relation between human action and its ethical worth, could be held as demonstrable by the reason."<sup>42</sup> A dual world was coming into being, one in which faith and reason were pitted against one another. And as reason provided the only access to the natural realm, faith was increasingly driven from having any role to play in understanding the world of man's experience. The result would be to divide the truth of religion from the truth of science and eventually to claim that only the truth of science possessed knowledge. However, this would only occur more explicitly in the next stage of Western Culture, the Renaissance.

Among the legacies of medieval learning, certainly of scholasticism, is the belief, descended from the Stoics, that "right *reason* was the source of all virtue."<sup>43</sup> The Studium represented a new nobility, one that would challenge the idea of nobility associated with both Sacerdotium and Imperium, namely, the nobility of the mind. Henceforth, nobility was not so much a product of a correct social order and established hierarchy, but "rested in the man who particularly cultivated his mind, *alias* the educated man."<sup>44</sup> Such a view presented a challenge to all constituted

42. Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 299.

43. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, p. 273.

44. Murray, p. 274.



authority, whether clerical or lay. What is more, it was a challenge presented on behalf of reason alone. To the clergy, it was manifested “in the usurpation of a canonical distinction,” in that it erected “a rival magisterial authority in ‘philosophers.’”<sup>45</sup> Reasoned analysis stood pre-eminent over dogmatical pronouncement, no matter whether those proclamations asserted the claims of Divinity or not. To the lay nobility which was based upon birth or wealth, it simply proclaimed the superior virtues of the educated man to the accidents of nature or the advantages of possessions. The “Reason” Ideal would brook no inferior status. In time, it would suffer no rivals.

45. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, p. 281.



*Part III - Modern Man*  
*“The New Paganism”*



## 6 • The Renaissance

### *The New Man Ideal*

#### *I▷ The Meaning of the Renaissance*

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the study of the past underwent considerable modification with the introduction of so-called *scientific* history, with the result that the world of learning witnessed a vast outpouring of research and interpretations based, it was supposed, upon more *objective* and rationally reliable analyses of the past than had until now been possible. This development had important implications for Western history in particular, for in conjunction with this more rigorous approach to the study of the past, the history of Western civilization was increasingly subjected to sharp re-evaluations of the periods into which it had been divided. The usual broad categories – ancient, medieval, modern – might still apply, but as scholars examined the past in ever more detail, these divisions seemed to them quaint and conventional. Consequently, along with a proliferation of new insights and re-interpretations allegedly based upon rational procedures and standards, many sub-divisions within these wider classifications began to appear which seemed to require a new understanding of each historical era. Sometimes a segment of history would seem to overlap two periods, making it more difficult to decide where the division between eras should be recognized. Earlier demarcations, it was often claimed, lacked clarity and *scientific* accuracy.

Of course, those who had *lived* the history had not been as aware of discontinuities as we are who must endeavor to provide an account of past events. The past would possess no meaning for us *as history* were there no changes to observe, no transformations to evaluate, no developments to record. We are aware, for example, that great intellectual, social and material differences separate the modern world from the medieval world. Nevertheless, there are great distinctions between the ancient and medi-

eval periods as well. Every period contains characteristics which make it unique, despite the existence of features which might seem notable departures from the overall temper of the times.

Nevertheless, it can be cause for great controversy when a portion of history seems, apparently, to defy period classification. The Renaissance has come to be viewed this way. An interested student of the period is struck by the fierce debates that have become a feature of Renaissance studies over the definition of its period concept. Rarely does any work appear in print without its author pressing his opinion. Does the Renaissance in its cultural manifestations represent primarily a Christian-medieval outlook, or is it more properly part of the modern era, in which pious asceticism and other-worldliness have become less attractive and man, glowing with a new Promethean self-confidence, radiates enthusiasm for the life of here and now? Such questions crop up repeatedly.

Some seek a middle ground and are mindful that certain times ambiguously compose *transition* periods and exhibit features of two eras, retaining much of the old while showing an inclination towards the new. For many, this characterization of the Renaissance seems the most satisfactory. As a transition period, then, it is synthesis or mixture, understood to be fluid and showing a tendency towards realignment. Transition periods, like this one, lack hard boundaries and solid parameters.

Despite its supposedly transitional nature, we believe that the Renaissance ought to be treated as part of a definite historical era, the *modern* one, because the Renaissance is primarily modern *secular-humanist* in its core ideals. The term *modern* recognizes a major redefinition of man away from the dominant Christian-medieval, and Augustinian worldview and towards a new, more pagan, anti-Christian outlook, with a new idea of culture and civilization. Although much of the surface remains medieval, the appearance should not obscure the true moral-religious change in Renaissance man.

The Renaissance includes mainly the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries. During the first two, the Trecento and Quattrocento, it was in Italy that the essential ideals of the

Renaissance arose and found cultural expression. By the sixteenth century the Renaissance ideal was no longer merely Italian, nor even primarily Italian, but had become a European-wide phenomenon. Its center had shifted from south to north, especially to the Netherlands, France, and England. In this period, styled the *high* Renaissance, the last vestiges of the medieval past gave way before the first full flowering of a world that was to continue up to the present day.

Our primary concern in this chapter is not with the Renaissance in its historical movements and phases, nor with its cultural residue that is still remarkably visible today. Most people think of the Renaissance primarily in terms of great works of art. Painters, sculptures, architects, poets and dramatists have left behind a wealth of examples of their genius. We have been taught to view their lofty creations as representative of a time when the human spirit, freed after centuries of sterile asceticism and other-worldliness, emerged to emphasize a new self-confidence. Renaissance artists are said to have shown a new appreciation for nature in all its variety, especially human nature in its uniqueness and manifold complexity. Their works, we are told, celebrate life by proclaiming a new freedom to explore novel ideas, to challenge old dogmas, to take charge of one's destiny, to glory in humanity and man's superiority over nature and his surroundings. They eloquently testify to the coming of age of man.

However, rather than create a new culture, these justly celebrated artists only sought to give aesthetic expression to the new cultural and religious temperament. Far more important were the thinkers, writers and statesmen who chiefly formulated the ethos that was central to the Renaissance, and it was during the Italian phase of the Renaissance that the most articulate form of that ethos can be seen to flourish. Their enduring legacy to modern culture was wrought in a moral and religious transformation which, as we shall see, entailed a new ideal of *power*.

We may divide the Italian Renaissance into two phases: the first from the early pioneers at the beginning of the fourteenth century up to the 1450s; the second, from around 1450 until the end of the century when Italy became the battleground of the

major European powers. Early in the first stage one city, Florence, became the birthplace and principal center of the Renaissance. From Florence emerged three figures to lead the way, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Petrarch would leave the deepest impression. By the end of the fourteenth century, Florence and Florentine ideas stood at the center of what has been called the *civic humanism* phase of the Renaissance, a period, defined by a new vision of the humanities, and of republicanism and civil liberty, which was marked by appreciation of the models of ancient Athens and Republican Rome. In time, Florence and her ideas would be challenged by the sinister power of the Visconti of Milan who represented a different type of Renaissance man. For men of this type, the Renaissance ideal was to be found in great men of power such as the Caesars, who knew how to impose their will by force and to resolve all disputes and conflicts, thus to achieve the well-ordered society as well as wealth and glory for themselves. This type of Renaissance man would triumph over the earlier sort by the mid-fifteenth century. Even Florence would bow to the power of the Medici. Thus began the second phase of the Italian Renaissance, when philosophers like Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, with the help of a new variant of ancient paganism, Egyptian Hermeticism, propagated a concept of man as a *magus*, one who claims the ability to tap the *power* of the universe to achieve every human ambition.

The term Renaissance means *rebirth*. Rebirth of what? For the principal thinkers, rebirth meant a reawakening after a barren time. The new age was a new enlightenment, an emergence from darkness and ignorance. That which was reborn was that which had been lost or smothered by the preceding age. Renaissance men saw themselves as having rediscovered the knowledge that was “needed to overcome [man’s] alienated condition and create a perfect society.”<sup>1</sup> The age of darkness, a concept invented by Petrarch (1304–1374), to whom we shall return, referred to the

1. Stephen A. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Secular: The Renaissance Origins of Modernity*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 1.



Middle Ages, an age of credulity and superstition which had been preceded by a classical age of wisdom and understanding. The possibility of rebirth lay in recovering that luminous ancient legacy and bringing it to the forefront of learning. The Renaissance, like all cultural revolutions, would hardly have succeeded without control of the educational agenda. The new program of learning, the *Studia Humanitatis*, would become the chief means to inculcate a new idea of man and society inspired by the classical period. By means of this recovery, man would be in a position to control his life and circumstances, to create for himself the *good life*. Thus, while the Renaissance drew from the past, its orientation was towards itself and its vision of knowledge as the means to forge new and better conditions for man and society. Stephen McKnight writes:

The most distinctive feature of modernity is the underlying conviction that an epochal break separates it from the preceding 'dark age.' Integral to this epochal consciousness is a new confidence in man's capacity for self-determination, and this in turn derives from the conviction that an *epistemological breakthrough* provides man with the capacity to change the conditions of his existence.<sup>2</sup>

Such comment makes clear why the Renaissance belongs more to the modern era than to the Middle Ages.

How does this Renaissance view differ from the outlook of the Middle Ages, if the earlier era also based its educational curriculum, as we indicated earlier, largely on ancient classical authors? Were not medieval men cognizant of antiquity? Did they not know or appreciate what the pre-Christian pagan thinkers taught about man and the nature of his experience? The answer, of course, is that they did indeed know, and accepted, much from ancient pagan authors. This was true throughout the Middle Ages, but especially in the High Middle Ages after the discovery and study of new materials on Aristotle from the Moslem world. Indeed, men in the *Christian* Middle Ages were

2. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Secular*, p. 9. (emphasis mine)

eager to learn much from the classical sources and to synthesize that learning with the heritage of the *fathers* of the church and the doctrines of the faith.

Here is the reason the Renaissance exploitation of the classical past differed fundamentally from that of the medieval period: Renaissance man no longer was interested in synthesizing the ideas of classical man with the intellectual tradition of the fathers and the faith. For medieval man, the classical heritage was *useful* so long as it bolstered an essentially *Augustinian* faith and theology, whereas Renaissance men wanted to replace the Augustinian-medieval view with an altogether different faith, one based upon the ancient pagans alone. Furthermore, the metaphysical features of the Augustinian and medieval view, ideas of a God-imposed hierarchy and imperially structured system of rule and order, were jettisoned in favor of a concept of man-made civil society as the product of civic virtue and social engineering. In the new Renaissance cosmology, it is not God who stands at the center, but the universe, infinite, mysterious, a vast playground for human will and self-purpose.

In many ways the outlooks of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance appear similar, but only if the comparisons are superficial. A great gulf separates the Augustinian-medieval view of man as he confronts the world and the ultimate reality of God from the Renaissance view which sees man solely in his relationship to the universe. Frances Yates encapsulates the differences in a comment that, while concerned with her diagnosis of the second phase of the Italian Renaissance, in fact could apply to the entire period: "What has changed is Man, now no longer only the pious spectator of God's wonders in the creation, and the worshipper of God himself above the creation, but Man the operator, Man who seeks to draw *power* from the divine and natural order."<sup>3</sup> In the Renaissance view, *divine* and *natural* blend imperceptibly into one another, and man sees himself as con-

3. Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 144. (emphasis mine)

fronting this reality solely to extract its power and tap into its resources, thereby to advance man's own cause and self-purpose.

Jacob Burckhardt made the central feature of his interpretation of the Renaissance a new attitude about the human individual.<sup>4</sup> There is a new and boundless aspiration on the part of the individual to seek for earthly fame. Man ceases to feel the need to hold in check his ambition as an affront to God and a threat to eternal salvation. Instead, he yearns to achieve glory and distinction as laudable goals here and now, and to be recognized for his accomplishments and their intrinsic worth while he lives. Man refuses to see all activity here as merely preparation for the hereafter, but accepts it as having inherent value and an immediate benefit for himself. This new vision of man no longer sees him as passive and receptive, but as supremely active and creative. The world and man are what man makes of them. Unlike medieval men, who accepted the conditions of life as pre-ordained in the transcendent counsel of God, therefore not to be questioned or doubted, Renaissance man looked at life and society as the arena for the realization of man's innate potential. The flowering of art and artistic achievement during this period is a reflection of this attitude, and served to promote the ideal of individual fame, both for artists themselves and their patrons. Hence, as Mebane writes: "The concept of the self as a work of art, an idea which became central to Renaissance culture, expresses the tendency of the period to allow 'art,' in the broad sense of 'human creative activity,' to compete with divine grace as the shaping force in human life and destiny."<sup>5</sup>

In the Renaissance, man looks at himself as having God-like power to recreate a world that conforms to his own wishes. At the very least, being similar to God Himself, man is called upon to assist God in His work of perfecting the world and man.

4. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Vol. I, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958) pp. 143–174.
5. John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 11.

Man does not sit idly by, nor does he pass through life as a pilgrim bound for another world, but sets himself to imitate and support God in His goal of bringing all things to completion. That means, “[t]o realize our divine potential we must, like God, exercise our powers in creative acts through which we reproduce in the external world the perfection we have come to see within our own minds.”<sup>6</sup> The standard of man’s activity is his own inner nature which is essentially divine, but which awaits man’s bringing it to fulfillment.

This implies, in turn, that unlike medieval man, men in the Renaissance do not wish to be confronted with any preconceptions, conventions or traditions that would foreordain their actions or behavior. They want no *external* authority to impose limits upon their activity if it would be perceived as hindering the realization of their potential. Man must be seen in his *primal freedom*, denying any and all barriers to the shaping of his *divine* destiny. The world is open before him as an object to be brought under his control. Nothing must stand in his way or pre-define his agenda. Man must be free to take the pathway which suits him and to discover his potential in any area he wishes to investigate. The Renaissance fascination with antiquity was not merely a curiosity to discover new ideas, but was also a way of affirming that nothing that any man had ever said or done at any time or place should be considered as untrustworthy knowledge for man. Whatever men have thought or asserted, because it is innately human, is a possible source of wisdom and truth, and to be accepted at face value. It was the Renaissance man’s way of claiming that the *Christian* Middle Ages had no monopoly on truth; in fact, that era had only promoted ignorance. A real insight into things human was to be found in consulting the authors of the classical past, whose ideas, it was often asserted, were *more* Christian than those of the medieval thinkers.

The Renaissance embraced the classics of antiquity on their own terms and for their own intrinsic merit, and not as requiring any re-adjustment for a Christian framework. They

6. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic*, p. 11.

viewed Greco-Roman civilization as a golden age of creative genius and great accomplishments by and for men alone. They looked to revive that ancient culture in order to transform their own world-view into one in which the perfecting of man becomes the chief preoccupation. In turn, they viewed this *rebirth* as so epochal in significance, so profound in its renewal of man's confidence in himself and his capability to find his own meaning and to further his own purpose, that, set next to the dark ages of Christianity, as McKnight comments, "The only suitable language to describe the epochal breakthrough is that of conversion and salvation."<sup>7</sup>

If anything marks the character of the modern age, beginning with the Renaissance, it is its anti-Christianity. Nevertheless, it is dependent upon concepts essential to Christianity, but these are invested with profoundly new meaning. For the *conversion* implied by the Renaissance meant a turning away from the Christian heritage, and the *salvation* looked to by Renaissance men was a new spiritual reality in which man was freed from any God other than his own potential, unrivaled divinity.

## 2> *The World of Urban Conflict and Civic Humanism*

Although the Renaissance marks a sharp break with the medieval-Augustinian world-view, it was nevertheless spawned in the late Middle Ages in northern Italy and forged amidst the struggle between *Sacerdotium* and *Imperium*, whose unresolvable clash seemed to compel men to look elsewhere for an idea of social order and for solutions to the disorder that followed their encounters. It is one legacy of the false institutional and cultural ideas of *Christian* monasticism and hierarchicalism that, when men were ready to break definitively from their mold, no real Christian-Biblical alternative was available to direct Western civilization into more genuinely Christian pathways. This void allowed men to turn back enthusiastically to the ideas of ancient

7. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Secular*, p. 15.

pagan Greece and Rome, almost emptying the developing culture of anything discernibly Christian. Perhaps it is too generous to think that much real Christianity had prevailed even in the previous period.

Life in the upper Italian peninsula had never quite conformed to the medieval pattern of rule. Since Roman times this region had had numerous flourishing cities. Despite the invasion of the Goths in the late fourth century, the Roman way of life was not totally disrupted. Not until the more barbarous Lombards (Langobardi) arrived in the sixth century did this area undergo social and political upheaval. Even so, a measure of order was soon restored when control was wrested from the Lombards by the invading Carolingian Franks. Once again cities, though on a smaller scale, re-emerged as the chief social characteristic of the region.

Italy was part of the new Western empire, and in theory the will of the emperor was the law of the land. Under the Carolingians, the area was governed by counts and viscounts installed by the King, but the distance from the center of imperial power allowed these local rulers considerable liberty of action. They quickly entrenched themselves as seigneurs – landed aristocrats – and behaved like petty feudal barons, yet maintained ties with the cities and their growing commercial and trading interests. The church, of course, was also present, but in northern Italy was less powerful in feudal terms than elsewhere in Europe. When the Carolingian world disintegrated in the ninth century the entire region was left a congeries of independent powers with no clear subordination to either secular or sacred authority. This fragmentation of power was a boon to the cities which discovered that, for the most part, they were left to develop commercially and to govern themselves, free from outside interference or taxation, a fact which history records as the reason for the growth and power of the great Italian city-states.

By the late tenth century, during the reign of the Ottonians, the German empire had recovered enough to reassert its claims of authority in most of its eastern imperial lands, including northern Italy, although the exercise of power was more prob-

lematic.<sup>8</sup> To regain a measure of control the Ottonian emperors tried to use bishops as a means of governing the region. Their authority was often checked by strong local interests and by the cities themselves, which were little inclined to submit to outside powers. Secular lords increasingly joined their interests with the quickening economic life of the cities, and found they were compelled to share political power with new men of wealth. This combination promoted local civic interests over imperial interests. In some places the bishops were absorbed into this social realignment. It was, for example, a Visconti bishop who established the power of the Visconti in Milan.

The burgeoning wealth of the Italian city-states aroused the covetous ambitions of imperial aspirants. Starting with Frederick Barbarossa in the mid-twelfth century, repeated unsuccessful attempts were made to compel the region's submission to armed force. With great energy the cities of Lombardy and Tuscany resisted every effort by imperial armies to impose royal-appointed rulers over them. Nevertheless, because of jealousies and fierce rivalries between the cities themselves, imperial ambitions were able to make headway with some factions. The proponents of the imperial party became known as the Ghibellines. During the same period, the papal struggle for the control of ecclesiastical investiture of bishops and elimination of simony (the purchasing of church office) in ecclesiastical appointments, a reform begun nearly a century earlier, would, but for almost entirely political reasons, give rise to an opposing faction called the Guelphs. In Italy "the Guelph party shattered... the last props of German feudal and imperial dominance."<sup>9</sup> As real power became entirely local, northern Italy became a political chaos in which city-states warred with one another in a ruthless struggle for regional control.

Amid the turbulence of the eleventh and twelfth centuries

8. A condensed discussion of this history can be found in Malcolm Barber, *The Two Cities: Medieval Europe, 1050–1320*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 251ff.

9. Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1988), p. 48.

important social changes were taking place. There was rapid growth in the birth rate, and the sudden surge in population caused scarce land for the small and mid-sized peasant to become even scarcer. To live off the land became increasingly difficult, since Italy was not a region with large stretches of arable land. Steady movement to the cities swelled urban populations. Major land values soared. However, the productivity of agriculture rose rapidly as well, and trade and manufacture mushroomed, absorbing the influx populations from the land into the growing craft industries and trades. This change increased the influence of the cities in the politics of the region, and shifted the balance of power from the land to the commercial centers.

The effect of this social change was to raise the demand by cities for self-government, and a system of *communes*, government by locally chosen nobles and respected citizens, emerged. However, the local nature of government fostered intense attitudes of self-interest, and cities became bitter rivals for the control of local advantage. Implacable conflicts over tolls, customs, riverways, seaways and the traffic of commerce and trade became endemic.<sup>10</sup> Each city viewed its neighbors with jealous suspicion. Each commune claimed monopoly over certain manufactured items and deeply resented competition from other communes. Instead of developing commercial ties, they fought fiercely with one another for control of territories and exclusive rights to economic resources.

Even more threatening to social order than the feuds which cities carried on with their neighbors were the disturbances suffered as competing factions within the city fought for control of communal affairs. Mercantile interests grew up around prominent families which vied with one another over the direction of policy, especially as policy chiefly concerned the need constantly to raise taxes in order to wage the necessary warfare with the neighboring community. These *families* and their many

10. Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 22.



dependents often gained control of a district where they exercised a monopoly of power. The leaders formed *consorteria* and went through the streets with armed retainers for their own protection and to intimidate rival families. The streets became battlegrounds. Each family, to secure greater control of its neighborhood, erected *towers* from which to keep watch on enemies, and to gain advantage in attack or to protect against one.

Against this background of civil turmoil merchants and craftsmen formed into guilds to protect themselves in the environment of fractious communes. It became impossible to carry on any trade or occupation without joining one of these organizations. Economic privileges and success were dependent upon political power. In the words of professor Martines: "Guilds were not just casual and friendly occupational organizations.... They burst upon the scene to satisfy urgent needs. Many turned themselves into armed groups. They sought the control of their craft and product, but the route often lay through politics and some form of violence."<sup>11</sup>

The result of this experiment in self-government followed the usual historical pattern. The breakdown of order seemed to demand more centralized power. To check the fractious rivalries, communal government in the thirteenth century gave way to centralized government – the *podesta* – a council with a strong executive. This change occurred in typical historical fashion, as an urgent demand of the *people*. Workers, artisans, small manufacturers combined with the petty nobility and ruling elites to put an end to neighborhood divisions. Some prominent families, out of a sense of rank, privilege, and self-esteem tried in vain to resist including the *populo* in the counsels of government. However, the *people*, to succeed, had to rely on the paid services of some powerful man or group of men. The effect nearly everywhere was the defeat of popular government and the creation of government by the *strongman*, forerunner of the *condottiere*. This was the *signoria*, government by a powerful nobleman with the backing of rich merchants, bankers, and money men. In

11. Martines, *Power and Imagination*, p. 40.

some cases – Florence being the most noteworthy – government remained in the hands of a strong bourgeois assembly with a limited executive power. The same might be said of Venice despite its oligarchical character. Elsewhere power fell into the hands of strong individuals. This was especially true in Lombardy where the increased power of the Visconti of Milan eventually led to Milanese domination of the region.

During these centuries, in this context of intense inter-city rivalries, a moral transformation gradually occurred. The city had become the fundamental social fact for Renaissance Italians. It became the principal moral fact as well. Men were proud of *their* cities and regarded themselves especially fortunate to have been born or brought up in one.<sup>12</sup> Loyalty and devotion to one's city was taken for granted as the paramount moral ideal, promoting a *secular* definition of human nature and society. Man's dominant social experience was no longer to be seen in medieval terms as contained within the *three orders* and shaped by obedience to the *church*. Man's existence was not predetermined according to some divinely ordained social hierarchy which was said to be because of sin and necessary for salvation. Instead, the basic fact of urban life was that men lived in a social context that was fostered and maintained by a moral commitment to *public* concerns which derived entirely from the exigencies of *public need*: the need for safety; the need to realize that personal welfare was founded upon the increase and promotion of the public welfare. This sense of public consciousness had no connection to religious salvation and did not stem from some higher obligation to contain sin and evil, but was said to derive entirely from man's innate impulse to gain public recognition and honor for his accomplishments, the satisfaction that comes from the approval of his fellow citizens. It was from this sense of public consciousness, with its belief that the city was the milieu in which human nature was formed and towards which man's efforts should be chiefly directed, that the ethos which has come to be known as *Renaissance humanism* would sprout.

12. Martines, *Power and Imagination*, p. 72

Humanists, like the ancient Sophists, spoke to the men of the new urban societies and offered an educational curriculum that would enable them to shape their ideals as men whose primary concern was public affairs, principally, their administration. Humanism, therefore, was not for the masses, but for ruling elites and men of great abilities. The humanist agenda was directed at whoever was responsible for the business of the *city* – to noblemen, rich bourgeoisie, princes, prelates, oligarchs – to provide instruction for men who ruled, to foster a course of instruction that would produce the best ruler. When they looked to the ancient poets of Greece and Rome, humanists did not do so simply for the sake of literary pleasure or personal moral advice, but to find moral examples to serve as guides for proper public leadership for men of their own day. Their study of history had a strictly utilitarian interest, to teach great men the way of greatness and powerful men how to exercise power. The humanist educational ideal stressed proficiency in language as a tool to be used by men of power. Rhetoric – refined eloquence – was necessary to persuade the citizens to act for the public interest, to guide the *passions* of the people and inspire them to make sacrifices for the glory of their city. The program of humanism had *politics* as its primary goal.

In a telling comment on the humanists of the period professor Martines writes: “The humanist attitude toward history was emphatically selective, elitist, self-congratulatory, and fixed to a criterion of worldly success.” Too often we have been led to believe that the humanism of the Renaissance was merely a disinterested study in all aspects of human experience for the sake of enriching our understanding and expanding our ideas of what it means to be *truly* educated. But the humanists of the period were not pursuing some disinterested study of classical thought simply to open the mind to an insight into things valuable for human experience in general. They meant to find the basis for the new belief in politics as the highest form of human activity and the successful ruler as the ideal type of man. The humanists “saw first and saw deepest into the grounds of praise for the earthly city: praise for politics, for men in civil society, for secular

history, riches, worldly accomplishments, and the pursuit of glory.”<sup>13</sup> The highest worldly good was to be found in outstanding political activity, which meant that all other *goods* were secondary to and derivative of politics. The program of humanism was very much an upper class phenomenon, as only prominent men would benefit from a humanist education. The humanists had contempt for any but ruling elites and great men. They despised the crowd and “affected disdain for all ‘mercenary’ trades, from petty shopkeeping to medicine and even the practice of law.”<sup>14</sup>

It would be natural to expect humanists to have a firm interest in redefining the moral basis of human behavior. They would not be content to hold the medieval-Augustinian view which says that man needs government in order to check his impulse toward evil, and would have little use for a concept of social order as merely necessary to prevent men from transgressing against God’s established order. The criterion that government was necessary because men were sinful and needed to fear a power that would act with a just retribution against their wicked behavior was one that Renaissance men for the most part came to despise. Social order and temporal power, rather than being necessary for some other-worldly benefit, were the means for realizing legitimate human aspirations for social and civic happiness. Man desires to live the best life possible, and rather than being essentially sinful, he possesses a natural reservoir of *virtue*. Against the background of the city-state wars and internal urban strife, the humanists endeavored to promote the idea that man could control his passions and channel them into constructive and socially beneficial ends. They found the basis for this optimism in the works of classical authors, particularly those who accepted and taught the Stoic doctrine of the *naturalness* of social and political organization.

In Stoic thought man was by nature virtuous but unformed. If he would live in accordance with virtue, he must

13. Martines, *Power and Imagination*, pp. 198 & 206.

14. Martines, p. 207.

cultivate his mind, control his passions and act for the good of humanity. At least in the Roman republican period, this doctrine had been used to promote the idea of Rome and of the citizen who sacrifices himself upon the altar of the public welfare. Rome was regarded as the fount of good and its moral customs as superior to others. Its past was a rich lesson in great men who had set aside worldly self-interest so that they might better serve the greater good of Rome.<sup>15</sup> They were examples to be followed. The Stoics believed that the best kind of life was the one lived by virtuous men in a well-ordered and harmonious commonwealth. Stoic doctrine furthered the idea that government, far from being a mere bulwark against evildoers, was an agent for *positive* good.<sup>16</sup> It was not only good in itself but enabled men to *become* good through service to civic well-being.

In like manner, Renaissance thinkers came to believe in the *secular* city as a natural, self-sufficient political organism requiring no justification other than the advantages it provided for its citizens. They accepted no *theological* justification for the idea of the state, because Christian theology contradicted their fundamental belief in the natural virtuousness of men to foster their own happiness, and because it restricted the actions of men to a social arrangement not of their own making. Politics was, for Renaissance men, not simply a given state of affairs descended from heaven to which men were required to subordinate themselves as best they could, but was an on-going process in which

15. Livy, the famous Roman historian of the first century BC, wrote in the first book of his monumental *History of Rome*: "The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings...for I do honestly believe that no country has ever been greater or purer than ours or richer in good citizens and noble deeds...." *The Early History of Rome*, Bks I–V, translated by Aubrey De Selincourt, (Penguin Books, 1986), p. 34

16. For here and what follows see George Holmes, *The Florentine Enlightenment, 1400–1450*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 150–167.

shifting imbalances became opportunities for virtuous men to employ their talents and energies in the generating of new policies that would enhance the civic welfare and redound to their own glory and reputation. In this context, there could be no *a priori* rules of behavior, no pre-ordained order. Men must be free to act as they see fit in order to shape a society that accords with their wisdom and foresight. The humanists had great confidence that they could *educate* rulers and other elites in the proper virtues using great examples from the past. Men so taught would always rule in the best interests of the commonwealth.

The transition from the fourteenth to the fifteenth century was a momentous time in Renaissance Italy, which saw a great struggle between the Visconti *tyrants* of Milan and the *republic* of Florence that extended forty years into the century. By the end of the fourteenth century most of the independent cities had been absorbed by one regional power or another. A policy of aggressive domination had been actively pursued by the Visconti, who ruled in Milan with absolute power. At the same time, the free cities of Tuscany had all been brought under the suzerainty of the city of Florence. Ostensibly a republic, Florence had nevertheless embarked on an expansionist policy of her own to prevent cities such as Pisa, Lucca and Siena from pursuing policies contrary to her interests. Everywhere power consolidated around a strong center. By the end of the fourteenth century there were five regional powers in Italy: Lombardy, ruled by Milan; Tuscany, under Florentine control; Venice, which was territorially confined mainly to its lagoon; the Romagna, the centuries-old patrimony of St. Peter; and the kingdom of Sicily in the south. Each would like to have had total control in Italy, but none had the means to achieve that goal. Despite limitations, the Visconti pursued an aggressive policy of expansion southward toward Tuscany. Florence, to survive as a free and independent city-state, would have to contend against an enemy who coveted her wealth and hated her institutions.

Florence had been the home of humanist ideas before this time, but the need to arouse the citizenry to patriotic fervor to resist aggression required the evocation of a moral ideal which

would move the people to defend their city. They must be brought to see that the issue was not simply one of life and property, but a choice between freedom or slavery, between a life in which full human potential was allowed to realize itself or one in which all human effort was subordinate to the dictates of absolute power, every man's capacity for good subjected to the will of one man. The period saw the efflorescence of *civic humanism*, which viewed the contest between Milan and Florence in stark contrast and sought to promote a vision of a public order, forged in the struggle between light and darkness, that with the guidance of the humanists would give birth to a new society of free men. Florence, *the Athens on the Arno*, would become the home of republicanism and the center from which would emanate a growing opposition to monarchy, that most medieval of institutions.

Florentines saw themselves as waging a campaign not merely against immediate danger but against centuries of ignorance and inhumanity. They sought to raise the issue beyond the need for self-protection to one which included a new vision of man and society, a vision of men who freely and self-consciously shape their society to achieve the best life possible here and now. To find the agenda for building such a society of the future they searched the ancient literary remains of Greece and, especially, Rome, with something of a "militant dedication to antiquity," to discover the ideals of *republicanism* and the notion that men are most virtuous under republican regimes and most full of vice and corruption under one-man rule.<sup>17</sup> The Visconti represented the odious alternative, and were made to symbolize all that was evil in monarchy. Florence would become the center of a type of Renaissance civic humanism which sought not merely to withstand the pressures of tyranny but to foster a new outlook which would make possible the constitution of a society that overcomes man's tendency towards this most virulent of political vices. In

17. Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 4.

anticipation of modern democratic liberalism, the thinkers of Renaissance Florence confidently saw in *state-building* a program for making men good and their societies happy and contented.

Among the many figures of the time, perhaps none represented the new current of thought more than Leonardo Bruni (1374–1444), whose writings proclaimed the active political life as the highest and most virtuous that men can lead. He had been trained by Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), a dominant figure of his day in the counsels of government as well as the founder of the Florentine circle of humanist scholars who were to represent the new generation of educated civic leaders. For Bruni, politics was no mere necessity imposed upon men so that their lives and relationships might be less subject to acts of injustice, thus freeing them for *higher* pursuits. Rather, for him, politics *was* the highest activity, the art which made all others possible, the means to overcome the power of *fortuna* in the circumstances of life, to improve and enrich the commonwealth and to change men for the better. In his introduction to Aristotle, Bruni asserted that “among the moral doctrines through which human life is shaped, those which refer to states and their governments occupy the highest position. For it is the purpose of those doctrines to make possible a happy life for all men....”<sup>18</sup> But politics meant *republican* politics, politics pursued by men who stand free from every power but the power of moral and intellectual persuasion and have the liberty of *will* to shape their own destiny and to triumph by means of their own virtue and greatness.

When Bruni thought of republican politics he did not think of institutional arrangements so much as he contemplated grand moral visions. He did not think of government ever being an oppressor of its people except in its *monarchical* form. Republican government was, almost by definition, free from the possibility of corruption and from tyrannizing over its people, because republican governments are made only by virtuous men. It,

18. Quoted in Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, trans. by Peter Munz, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 41.



therefore, requires the right kind of men for republics to thrive or survive. How are such men found? Here Bruni drew upon the resources of his humanist education. Such men are not found so much as taught. They are men who have studied how to be virtuous. They are men who have the *knowledge* of virtuous deeds mentally and spiritually before them. Where do such men find such knowledge? The answer came from Petrarch, who believed that it came from the examples of great men in the classical past.

Petrarch has been acclaimed the father of the new *humanitas*, the first to state unequivocally the belief that the educated man was only made possible through dialogue with the great masters of the ancient past. "These masters alone had understood the full importance of the soul..."<sup>19</sup> That is, they understood human nature, what makes it good and what makes it bad. They possessed a remarkable knowledge of what was needed to cure the bad and produce the good. They were not mere teachers of dead abstractions, like the hated scholastics, but had supposedly gained real insight into human experience.

Humanists such as Petrarch turned to antiquity because they wanted to know about man and believed that the scholastic methodology with its logical and grave discourses about God and the intellect could tell them nothing. They disdained any pre-established intellectual order which imposed *authority* on the mind of man and restricted his ability to study human nature as an ongoing *creative* process. This attack on scholasticism also implicated Divine revelation, which presented a definitive interpretation of man, explaining man entirely in terms of his relationship to God. This *theological* interpretation of man did not, so they felt, take sufficient account of *real* human experience. Furthermore, it devalued human experience by always seeing it through the prism of sin and salvation. Worst of all, it kept men in subjection to political tyranny and subordination.

Petrarch was the first to look at human achievements in past and present primarily as examples of human exertion and experience which were valuable for their own sake apart from any

19. Garin, *Italian Humanism*, p. 19.

pre-conceived theological mental order. He believed that man's deeds could be explained on a purely human level, as the product of his passions, ambitions, goals, struggles and accomplishments, without reference to anything beyond man himself. By studying the experiences of men of the past one could learn to know oneself and discover the means to overcome the vicissitudes of fortune in the lives of men and societies. Petrarch came to represent a new brand of education, that acquired by the study of human experience and of other men's explanations of that experience. Armed with the moral lessons of this education, the humanists, following Petrarch, believed it possible to achieve the best civilization for man.

Bruni, and others after Petrarch, expressed a bold confidence in the will of man to accomplish great things on man's behalf. Real *power* was at man's disposal through his *willingness* to take hold of it. Man can change his circumstances; he can elevate virtue over vice and thereby defeat whatever fortune sends his way. In the face of the threat of tyranny great men can triumph. What is more, they can achieve a type of society in which men are free from this scourge. The means was the moral emulation of the ancients, for as Petrarch in the preface to his *De viris illustribus* so assuredly proclaimed: "...through the remembrance of virtue we censure vice."<sup>20</sup>

It would be possible to complete our discussion of the civic humanism phase of the Italian Renaissance, with its confident belief that virtue would always triumph over vice and so enable man to realize the good society, were it not necessary to take account of the thought of one of the last of the civic humanists – Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457). Valla introduced an important feature of humanism, one that, despite his belief to the contrary, would simply undermine the foundations upon which the humanists of the time had naively taken their stand.

It has been said that Valla merely represented the belief in

20. Quoted in Donald R. Kelley, ed., *Versions of History from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 227.

the value of this life and all that pertains to it. More especially, he stood for the view that nature was normal, and the corollary that the body was a legitimate means of enjoyment which should be accepted and not suppressed. In fact, he went so far as to maintain that pleasure and the senses should be valued as "the goal and prize of action."<sup>21</sup> Man should seek what is pleasurable for its own sake and should not hold something that is deemed pleasurable to be either abnormal or shameful; nor should the pleasurable be confined to non-bodily (i.e., *spiritual*) things. More importantly, Valla denied that pleasure of any sort should be viewed as the product of good behavior or the outcome of rightly applied morals, but should be sought after and accepted simply because *it pleases*.

Valla, of course, hated monasticism and the abstention of the *flesh* which undergirded its outlook. To him, there was no distinction or opposition between flesh or spirit in the medieval dualistic sense. There was only one nature, and nothing that was *natural* was antithetical to it in any way. Men should not try to live contrary to nature, but in conformity with it. The pleasures of this life in every bodily sense are entirely appropriate and natural. There is no virtue in the denial of the body, neither does any moral code pre-exist to demand that the body be used or enjoyed in accordance with its dictates. Valla believed that men and women could, without any guilt whatever, pursue the goal of pleasure in accordance with only one rule, the rule of *primal nature*.

A program of such action would not long remain compatible with the triumph of *virtue* over *vice* as the civic humanist so ardently believed. With no moral code but *primal nature*, who is to say what is virtue or vice? More importantly, a real knowledge of human nature, which Augustine better understood from Scripture, clearly shows that the pursuit of pleasure in whatever guise it appears removes any restraint on human behavior and ultimately destroys every social order. If men are not restrained by any moral code but the wish to satisfy the senses, they will

21. Garin, *Italian Humanism*, p. 51.

soon come into conflict with one another. Whenever this occurs, social order must be enforced by those strong enough to impose their will upon others. Indeed, by the mid-fifteenth century little remained of the earlier ideal of civic humanism, for powerful men ruled absolutely. A different type of humanism would emerge.

### *3> The World of Elitist Values and Renaissance Superstitions*

Near the mid-point of the Quattrocento the idea of *humanitas* underwent a considerable transformation, impelled mainly by the defeat of civic humanism and the end of the republican period. The war between Florence and Milan brought to an end the Florentine experiment with republican political institutions, though not by reason of military defeat. Though Florence was hard pressed, especially when nearby cities with their own special interests allied with the Visconti in concerted attack, the Florentine armies frequently showed superiority over the enemy forces. Nevertheless, the need to provide for military force, its maintenance and deployment, was a major cause of stress in the economy, the social structure and the politics of the state which led to the functioning end of the republican system.

In order successfully to resist Milanese aggression the Florentines found it necessary increasingly to rely on powerful generals who would be willing, for the right material inducement, to lead their armies in the field and, when it was convenient, arrange truces and broker treaties with the enemy. Such military commanders would demand great leeway in making decisions and acting. The independence required for taking initiative in the field was bound to disturb the always fragile nature of republican institutions and practices, especially if the generalissimo proved successful. On such occasions the people would support him even if it meant a diminution of their liberties. By the 1430s one family, the Medici, whose prominence stemmed originally from banking, had begun to play a leading role in the affairs of the city. The Medici were no lovers of popular government or of

municipal assemblies of any sort. To the contrary, they admired the strongmen, especially the Visconti (soon to be replaced by the Sforza), and believed firmly in social order ruled by a single powerful individual. But they did not believe in mere power; at least, they did not wish to appear to do so. Instead, they believed that one should rule, or seem to rule, from an *insight* into the total nature of reality and man. Few could possibly hope to achieve such an objective. The people must be made to rely upon superior men and minds. The Medici came to stand for a kind of enlightened despotism as the only solution for social and political disorder.

Florentine merchants, originally enthusiastic about the war, which they hoped would guarantee their monopolies of trade and commerce, grew weary of the struggle and simply wanted it to end. Their interests in the ideals of republicanism and civic virtue waned. The sacrifices and costs were beginning to prove too much to bear, they wished only to be left free to pursue their commercial and industrial activity and were ready to cede power and control to the Medici. Florence, the bastion of civic humanism, suffered moral exhaustion, and fell into the hands of domineering individuals who, to provide an argument for the legitimacy of their rule, supported the cause of a different type of humanism.

It was no accident that as civic humanism lost ground the moral example of great men faded as the principal humanist educational ideal. In the earlier phase of humanism great interest was shown in the poets and writers of ancient Rome whose works provided the lessons of virtue to be imitated. In this program, little thought initially was given to the Greeks with the exception, of course, of Aristotle. But this would change. From around the beginning of the fifteenth century, Greek literature began to attract the attention of many humanists who were no longer content to study only what was known of the classical past from Latin sources. There was a growing desire to read more in the ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato. But knowledge of the Greek language was neither thorough nor widespread and instruction in the language was not readily available. That, too,

was soon to change. Excellent teachers became available when Greek scholars from Byzantium, fleeing the Turkish peril, landed in Italy. Among the more famous were Manuel Chrysolaras and Cardinal Bessarion. They also brought with them previously unavailable dialogues by Plato, as well as works by Plotinus, Xenophon, and Isocrates. Much that was previously unknown about Greek ideas suddenly emerged to inspire a great revival of interest in ancient Hellenic culture. By mid-century it dominated the humanist educational program.

Above all, the Greeks meant philosophy! Or, we might say, metaphysics! Earlier, because of their disgust with the rigors of hair-splitting Scholasticism and its association with Aristotle, the promoters of humanism had shown no patience for philosophy or speculative metaphysical questions. They were eager to replace the Augustinian-medieval world-view, but had been unable to find the conceptual basis for doing so. To a great extent they had succeeded with a moral redefinition of human nature. However, they became increasingly aware that in order totally to supplant the medieval-Christian outlook they would need more than a new moral vision; they needed a new explanation of the existence and nature of reality, one that placed man at the center of all things and gave him the stature and power he needed to shape that reality to please himself and to advance the goals of the new humanist ideas of order. They would need a philosophy.

As this growing interest in things Greek opened new doors into ancient Greek thought, out stepped Plato, as we indicated, to show the way that humanism should take. Until the end of the Renaissance, his philosophical ideas would control thinking and discussion of all substantive issues. But while Plato was seized upon to give new direction, he would not stand alone: he would be accompanied by the newly discovered esoteric religious source known as *Hermeticism*. It was by means of this combination of Platonism and Hermeticism that Renaissance humanists would at last discover the philosophy that would help man reclaim his potential divinity and enable him thereby to attain to a new consciousness of his exalted place in the scheme of things.

The man who arose to lead this new humanist assault was Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), the greatest philosopher to emerge in the Renaissance. Ficino, born near Florence, was the son of a physician who regularly treated the Medici. He was extremely gifted, and his father expected him to study medicine. But in the course of his studies at the University of Florence, Ficino discovered a passion for philosophy which led him down a different path. At age 23 he began the study of Greek and demonstrated an uncanny ability to master the language. His great desire was to use this skill to study the Greek thinkers. He was deeply attracted to the life of *contemplation*, but not as it was understood by monasticism which saw it as a means to mortify the flesh. Ficino believed in the *mind* and the purification of the soul as the chief means by which to arrive at that stage where the philosopher is enabled to see into the unity and truth of all things. He was especially attracted to Plato, for Plato did not think in terms of logical abstractions and categories as did Aristotle, but in terms of grand metaphysical visions of reality, in which were revealed the links between all aspects of existence, especially that between man and God. Ficino taught a new ideal of knowing, one that involved a total comprehension of all things, which thereby enabled man to have total control of his surroundings.

This sort of thinking had great merit with Renaissance rulers. Cosimo de Medici, in particular, found in the new Platonism a program for building a humanist society to be run by elites like himself. These types alone would know how to bend reality to their advantage. Consequently, it was necessary for them to be absolutely in charge, for the people as a whole would have neither the time nor inclination to grasp the nature of reality, and would be incapable of doing so in any event. They would need to rely upon others to guide and order their world for them. Renaissance rulers looked to the new philosophy to produce the justification for the sort of *rulership* that Plato himself had taught – *philosopher kings*. The good society could only be produced when select minds, who possessed greater mental resources as well as a better knowledge of the good of the whole community, were put in charge. Ficino wrote under the rising eminence of

Medici who wanted their prominence to be based upon the possession of greater knowledge of the mysteries of reality and thus a better understanding of how society should be ruled for its own good. This is the chief reason why Cosimo commissioned Ficino to translate the whole of the Platonic and Neoplatonic corpus. He was not merely interested in advancing the cause of learning; he wanted to be seen as making available the *word of truth* by which superior men live and with which they establish and maintain order.

What made Plato attractive to Ficino was his notion that reality in its essence is Intellectual, a product of Reason or Mind. Plato's concept that transcendent Forms underlay all aspects of Nature supposedly insured the unity of all things and determined everything according a single rational plan. However, Ficino was influenced in his understanding of Plato by the thought of Plotinus who conceived of the cosmos as a Logos or Soul whose true *spiritual-rational* reality lay hidden behind the appearances of external nature. The Platonic Forms or Ideas, being Divine in nature, act as the "vivifying forces which unite with their opposite, matter, through the mediation of the rational soul."<sup>22</sup> In this instance, the rational soul meant the philosopher, who has cultivated the highest part of his soul (intellect) in order that he might grasp the reason of things in their eternal truth. To Ficino reality was primarily Rational, but only to a mind that had awakened itself to see the Form of all things. Although truth abides in all of Nature, it can only become truth for men when they *conjure* it from its external appearance. Man can disclose the Reason of the world because he is essentially a participant, by means of his mind, in the Divine Logos. "Humanity is the center of the cosmos and the mediator between the eternal and temporal worlds...."<sup>23</sup> Man is a microcosm of the Macrocosm, and as such is not only capable of knowing the *rational plan* of the world, but of actually taking part in its life-giving creativity. As Ficino stated in *Five Questions Concerning the Mind*: "by means of mind

22. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic*, p. 22

23. Mebane, p. 22.



we shall ourselves have the *power* of creating mind....”<sup>24</sup> In other words, man not only observes the order of the cosmos, he actually cooperates in creating and perfecting it. Man is a little god who, through human knowledge and action, shares with the big God the power of fashioning and redeeming the world.

Platonic thought was not the only source of inspiration for Ficino in the construction of his Renaissance philosophy of man and the world. In 1462, after Ficino had already commenced translation work on his first Platonic manuscript from Cosimo, he was interrupted by something that would play an even larger role in his thinking. Cosimo, it seems, had come into possession of a Greek text containing the discourses of what would become known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It supposedly recorded the thought of one Hermes Trismegistus who was considered at the time to be the most ancient source of pagan divine knowledge. His ideas were said to parallel closely the thought of Moses and later Plato. But his ideas were older, more ancient, than theirs, and since there were parallels between him and both Moses and Plato, then the latter two must have borrowed notions from Hermes. Here was an ancient wisdom more venerable than anything that anyone then possessed, closer to the truth because closer to the beginning of all things. Ficino must stop work on Plato and translate it!

These Hermetic writings aided Ficino in the formulation a radical new conception of humanity, for one of the central thoughts in these documents maintained that before the Fall “[h]umanity possessed godlike creative powers and was closely akin to the Son of God, the Logos who created the visible world.”<sup>25</sup> *Primal man* shared, in other words, in the nature of divinity and had received great creative powers and knowledge of the whole cosmos by which he was then able to construct a microcosmic social order. “Man was originally a type of terrestrial god capable of creating an earthly paradise.”<sup>26</sup> Mankind,

24. Quoted in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. by Ernst Cassirer, et. al., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 194. (emphasis mine)

25. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic*, p. 18.

however, experienced a descent from this exalted status and underwent a corruption into matter and lost connection to his divine beginnings. The purpose of these Hermetic materials was to offer instruction for a select few who sought the way of *regeneration*, which meant the regaining of the lost godlike power and knowledge. Through a radical self-transformation man could recover his lost estate and once again become the “Son of God” with power and knowledge to remake reality into a new paradise. In *Corpus Hermeticum XI* Hermes declares: “unless you make yourself equal to God, you cannot understand God...by a bound free yourself from the body; raise yourself above time, become Eternity; then you will understand God. Believe that nothing is impossible for you, think yourself immortal and capable of understanding all, all arts, all sciences, the nature of every living being.”<sup>27</sup> Such sentiments deeply influenced the mind of Ficino, and through him and others penetrated to the core of Renaissance ideals.

This vision of man as recovering his lost creative powers would give birth to the notion that there lies embedded in human nature qualities on the order of magic. Man was a *magus* who could penetrate with his knowledge to the *spiritual* core of all reality and there discover the means to make that same reality bend to his indomitable will. Mankind need not live in passive dependence upon the order of the cosmos. Rather, his spiritual nature which participates in the Spiritual Nature of the world gives him the advantage of knowing, or of being able to know, the secrets of existence. Armed with such insight he would then be in position to transform Nature to suit his own interests. Indeed, to have this knowledge and not to use it to transform and recreate social utopia would almost be a dereliction of duty. Man must extend his powers and apply his knowledge, otherwise

26. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Secular*, pp. 41-43.

27. *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, Trans. & Ed. Walter Scott, (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), p. 221. I, however, have used the translation as provided in Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 32.

he lives at the mercy of his circumstances and does not control his fate. It would be unworthy of so *divine* a being as man not to be “satisfied until he is complete master of his destiny with no dependency on any other being.”<sup>28</sup>

For Ficino this combination of Platonism and Hermeticism provided the foundation of a new religion, a new faith. He believed passionately that reality is Reason and Reason is reality, and that man’s mind is of a piece with this reality and therefore inclines towards it with a natural affinity. We may be weighed down by matter and body, but the intellect has had placed within it the power to move towards the infinite as towards a familiar object. Reality is transparent to the searching gaze of the intellect in its striving for the truth and of the will in its striving for the good. Though truth and goodness may appear hidden to the mass of the people burdened with matter and sense, and satisfied with particular transient objects, the mind of the philosopher, because he sees clearly, converses only with the universal and everlasting reason of things. He alone ascends the steep slopes to the realm of God and returns with God’s thoughts as his tools for the transformation of the world.

At this juncture the humanist agenda looks quite like some mystical experience. And knowledge appeared to be similar to magic, for it lacked the later scientific and rigorous technological overtones that would give the new humanist *religion* a more rationally mundane character. But a decisive shift had occurred. Ficino had introduced a new vision of man as a new god able to create a world by means of a regenerated intellectual power. The world is no longer merely a given fact, it is now a product of human creative action. “In mathematics, music, and architecture, in exploring the inner workings of nature, and in poetry and oratory we reveal our participation in the God-head.”<sup>29</sup> More importantly, man has the ability to imitate the heavenly

28. McKnight, *Sacralizing the Secular*, p. 56. “...the perfection of one’s own knowledge brought with it the power, as well as responsibility, to transform the outside world.” Mebane, *Renaissance Magic*, p. 29.

29. Mebane, p. 25.

realm in his creation of civil order and human government. Little wonder that this brand of humanism appealed to rulers and elites. This was no medieval view; we are on the doorstep of the modern age.

Next to Ficino stood Pico della Mirandola to give additional support to this new humanist outlook. Pico, too, was fascinated with the notion that man was God-like in nature and capable of learning the total secrets of nature in order to use that knowledge to construct human society. Pico was, perhaps, less interested in the nature of reality than he was in redefining human nature in keeping with the new exalted status that Renaissance philosophers attributed to him. The phrase *the dignity of man* has perhaps come to describe the program of the Renaissance more than that of any other. While the phrase was first used in the fourteenth century by Giannozzo Manetti, it was Pico who made it famous as an epitaph of the Renaissance by the title of his most famous work, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. What Pico desired to convey in that book was that, if man was truly God-like, then he is the cause of his own nature and is free to work his own will. Not only does he create the external conditions of his existence, but he creates his own self in the same act. Man is not a given, pre-determined nature; he does not receive his nature from an external source, but he alone produces what he is, and he is free to remake himself without constraint or limitation. In Pico's fictional account of the origin of man we read these oft-repeated words:

Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire.... Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.<sup>30</sup>

30. Pico, *On the Dignity of Man*, quoted in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. by Ernst Cassirer, et. al., pp. 224 & 225.

Elsewhere Pico made his view even more clear:

Man alone has no nature which determines him and has no essence to determine his behaviour. Man creates himself by his own deeds and thus he is father of himself. The only condition he is subject to is the condition that there is no condition, i.e., liberty. The compulsion he is subject to is the compulsion to be free and the compulsion to choose his own destiny, to build the altar of his own fame with his own hands or to forge his own chains and convict himself.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, like Ficino, Pico never imagined that just any man was so freely in charge of his own destiny. He, too, believed that only men who have learned the secrets of philosophy, who have cleansed their souls of ignorance and vice, and who have become illuminated by the bright light of reason are then prepared to “ordain” for themselves the limits of their own nature. Those others who remained steeped in darkness and the realm of the senses are fit only to be led by the wisdom of the philosopher. He who has been initiated into the Palladian order of the mind and well taught therein is best equipped to descend to earth, there to build whatever world he would choose for us to live in.

It has been said that Pico, like Renaissance men in general, simply desired the liberation of man from every concept of external compulsion, authority, or limitation. He wanted nothing but a radical freedom for man. He wanted no pre-defined order such as had been prescribed in the Augustinian-medieval view. In this respect, he viewed man as *Fallen* only if he failed to live in accordance with his own original calling to ordain his own limitations or choose his own destiny. At the same time, it was possible for man to regain his original divine status by a self-will, by choosing to take the *higher* pathway of philosophy. Philosophy was truth wherever it was to be found – in Plato, in Moses, in Jesus, in

31. *On the Dignity of Man*, quoted in Garin, *Italian Humanism*, p. 105.

Hermes Trismegistus, in the Jewish Cabbala. In the end, it was entirely up to man, but Pico was not in doubt that man would choose to follow *holy philosophy* if and when great minds, like himself, showed the way and promised the rewards.

The Renaissance was clearly a watershed moment in Western culture and civilization. It represented a new confidence in man and the belief that man was free to determine his place in the universe and that he possessed an incomparable power for self-transformation. Man was no mere creature, but he was God-like; and being God-like he did not go through life passive and resigned to his circumstances. He rose up and confronted them; he grasped the truths of reality and thereby changed his circumstances to meet with his satisfaction. The goal of man's life was not some higher spiritual plane, some angelic non-bodily existence, but it was to create paradise here and now. Man as a sharer in the Divine Nature could not rise any higher than he already is. While this outlook remained somewhat fuzzy and mysterious in the time of the early to mid-Renaissance, by the late Renaissance man's increasing fascination with mathematics and science would eventually provide him with the means to cast off what was left of his medieval and Augustinian heritage.

## 7 • *The Enlightenment* *The New Nature Ideal*

### *1> The Scientific Revolution*

If the Renaissance was the first to unbolt the gate of the modern secular age, the Enlightenment thrust it wide open. The eighteenth century – the century of Enlightenment – marks that period often distinguished as the high water mark of *rational man*. It was, purportedly, a time when man, fully assured of his innate and boundless powers of reason, confidently ventured forth to construct a world in which *truth* as discovered and proclaimed by science becomes the fulcrum upon which he hinges all his beliefs, actions, and decisions. *Enlightenment-through-science* embraced the confidence that man would thereby find the answer to all his questions and overcome every difficulty which blocked his path. Ignorance, the root of all error, underlay every fault and failing of the human race. But in human reason lay vast, and hitherto untapped, powers to vanquish the foes of ignorance and stupidity. Properly cultivated, it would lead mankind to the promised land of knowledge, virtue and happiness. With the arrival of the Enlightenment not a few dared to believe that man stood on the verge of Divine-like perfection and achievement.

The route from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment optimism of the eighteenth century lay through the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century. Without the intervention of this great intellectual and cultural force, the rise of modern humanism scarcely is imaginable. Though the Enlightenment is first thought to have brought into vogue many of modern man's *secular* beliefs and ideals, these were made possible on the basis of assumptions which began to be put forth during the late Renaissance in connection with changes that were then taking place in science and the knowledge of the workings of nature – changes which, although connected with the Scientific Revolution, were not intrinsic to it, nevertheless, by making certain

inferences from the new type of thinking it brought to light, emerged to produce the real impetus toward modern *secular* humanism of which the Enlightenment became the first great expression. As this secular humanism remains firmly embedded in our Western culture, it would be well to reflect back on the source from which it sprang.

The Scientific Revolution made possible an understanding of the natural world that differed markedly from all that had been previously known, the differences being so great as to warrant the notion that what man came to understand of the workings of nature did not amount to a progressive improvement in continuous line with past ideas, but instead catapulted him onto an entirely different track of comprehension. We wish to stress this, for there has been a propensity of late to see the Middle Ages as a time of considerable scientific and technological advancement. However, while we might not dispute that medieval men were technically proficient in many things so far as it went in a time when men generally were taken up with concerns other than the material betterment of living conditions or who, for the most part, lacked the curiosity to know the secrets of nature for reasons other than *spiritual* allegory, nevertheless modern scientific methods were not being practiced in the Middle Ages. Quite simply, medieval men would not have understood them. Moreover, the technology of the Middle Ages, while certainly useful for constructing cathedrals and castles or grinding grain into flour and so forth, did not bring about the sorts of changes which differed all that much from previous centuries. It was not a type of knowledge that, in time, would invent the automobile or computer. This required an altogether new way of thinking about natural phenomena, which the Scientific Revolution provided.

The Scientific Revolution, however, proved radical in ways far beyond our mere understanding of the workings of natural processes or the technological improvements that followed therefrom. How ever extraordinary were the changes wrought in the wake of the Scientific Revolution and continuing in no less remarkable ways up to the present, so far as these have affected



man's external environment, the transformation in the way man thinks about himself and how he sees his place and purpose in the cosmos has been of even greater importance. The arrival of modern science was, in the words of Alexandre Koyre, accompanied by a "radical spiritual revolution." That is, there occurred along side this new type of understanding a profound "secularization of consciousness...[a] turning away from transcendent goals to immanent aims...[a] replacement of the concern for the other world...[with a] preoccupation with this life...[a] substitution of the subjectivism of the moderns for the objectivism of the medievals and ancients...."<sup>1</sup> Whereas ancient and medieval men looked upon nature as something to be contemplated for its *spiritual* (ideational) value, and therefore for the faith that it served to confirm, modern men from the time of the Scientific Revolution only wanted to dominate and master nature. This change, despite antecedents which led up to and prompted it, occurred as no gradual process, but was an abrupt and definitive historical transition. It involved the complete elimination of one way of thinking and its replacement by an altogether different way. Koyre's comment, once again, expresses the radical character of the thinking which accompanied this transformation:

The scientific and philosophical revolution... can be described roughly as bringing forth the destruction of the Cosmos, that is, the disappearance, from philosophically and scientifically valid concepts, of the conception of the world as a finite, closed, and hierarchically ordered whole... and its replacement by an indefinite and even infinite universe which is bound together by the identity of its fundamental components and laws, and in which all these components are placed on the same level.<sup>2</sup>

Modern humanist man, especially, ceased to think of the realm of nature in terms of harmony, form, perfection, meaning

1. Alexandre Koyre, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publisher, 1958), p. 3.

2. Koyre, p. 4.

or goal. Instead, he preferred to look at the world strictly in terms of facts and functions which he claimed was devoid of intrinsic purpose or meaning. If value or purpose belonged anywhere, it was said to be merely an aspect of man's subjective psyche and no longer inhered objectively in things. Besides a new understanding of the workings of nature, there also was fostered a changed outlook on the *idea* of nature as an object of thought and a realm of activity, one which, supposedly, provided man with a new confidence and a new agenda – to master the laws and principles of nature, thereby to control her with the aim of improving the material existence of man.

The new scientific point of view was based upon the idea of bodies in motion, both in heaven and on earth, and was grounded upon the direct observation of their movements by mechanical and mathematical principles which were sought for their application to industrial and technological needs. In other words, the new science sprang from a strong utilitarian motive. Man discovered that he could control, or at the very least accommodate, the forces of nature, and in so doing improve his lot. Not surprisingly, the new science quickly found support within learned circles in the early modern era as a result of the uses for material betterment to which its promise of rational knowledge could be applied. That science could relieve the hardship of life and reduce the drudgery of man's labor was obvious. But of even greater importance, as a type of knowledge, it proved to be superior to all forms of previous knowledge, especially that of the scholastic world of arid and speculative disputations. Henceforth, all knowledge that failed to meet the criterion of the practical, tangible improvement of the human condition was viewed as suspect, and, by the time of the Enlightenment, as nothing less than credulous ignorance or fallacious nonsense. This new type of knowledge steadily gained allegiance in every area of thought and endeavor.

The seventeenth century clearly marked an epoch break in the course of Western civilization, ushering in an age in which the dominant ideas were no longer theological but anthropological. The primary emphasis in knowledge had to do with the

implementation of concrete and immediately earthly goals, made available to man from the resources of his own intellect and reason. Knowledge, then, did not have any connection with God, nor did it reflect His truth in the world, but it was strictly an instrument in man's material improvement, a tool for mastering the heretofore dimly understood workings of a capricious nature. As a new conception of knowledge, the Scientific Revolution unleashed the forces of humanism in ways that the ancient Greeks could only have imagined, for the new thinking supposedly enabled man to build a world of his own choosing and eliminate from consideration every voice or authority but that of his own mind and will.

A specific feature of the new mental universe was the passionate desire to find *truth* as the goal of a rational quest, a *truth* which would bear the capacity to *save* mankind from doubts and controversies, from differences of religious or moral opinions and put all to rights again in eternal peace and harmony. It is simply impossible to understand the faith of the modern humanistic world unless we see that knowledge to it is an instrument of salvation, a means to erect a unified humanity and to do away with all that sets men at conflict with one another. For the past three hundred years men have believed that *truth*, as the product of *scientific* methods, would act as a new *law* over "everything from nature to society and art."<sup>3</sup> Rejecting revelation, man looked to a new "master principle" to order his world.<sup>4</sup> The modern mind vigorously condemns all "external" authority; none but the mind of man exists for modern men.<sup>5</sup> God is vehemently denied, or, at most, reduced in stature, whereas man, set next to Him, is exalted and *divinized*. At the very least, man's

3. Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600–1950*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), p. 35.

4. See, Rousas John Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1994). The first two chapters are especially relevant.

5. E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1954), p. 17.

mind is made to be on a par with God's and the law of *truth*, which man supposedly discovers through his science, is said to be the same for both.

The knowledge which the new thinking was said to have discovered was mechanical, having no other purpose but to observe the movement of bodies in time and space which are subject to strict rules of cause and effect. In conjunction with this, reality was severed into *mind* and *matter*, sometimes referred to as *thought* and *extension*. Knowledge was said to be only concerned with matter or extension, for it was all that was real or knowable. Mind or *spirit* was eliminated from every consideration of knowledge, as were all those characteristics of man which appertained to mind or *soul* and which, therefore, cannot be made quantifiable. The world of man's experience was split, then, into *subjective* and *objective* categories, with the pretense that *truth* belonged only to the objective, mechanically determined natural realm and was knowable only to those who possessed the *key* to knowledge, namely, mathematics. Everything that could not be objectively measured or numbered was viewed as an intrusion from an alien sphere. In his quest for knowledge, man must eliminate all that is subjective and non-material. This included God, for God is not someone or something that comes within the realm of tangible observation. The only place God retained in the thought of modern scientific man, and this lasted until the rise of evolution in the nineteenth century, was the hypothetical place He was thought to occupy in the necessary order of cause and effect.

The rise of modern science and scientific methods based upon strict mathematical calculation and the mechanical movement of material bodies according to universally necessary laws of cause and effect has enabled the humanistic tendency of Western man to thrive as never before. It has supposedly given the mind of man interpretative control of all reality, and being in possession of that sort of mental sovereignty has encouraged the belief that man can bend reality to his will and fashion a world according to his wishes. He has come to believe that science and scientific methods can be applied to every facet of life and exist-

ence with the same positive results. It has emerged as an article of faith that modern Enlightenment man will, by means of further progress in knowledge as directed by scientific methods, arrive at the goal of a total or exhaustive rational understanding, and that such a complete comprehension will then give him the power to correct every defect of the human condition. This has, perhaps, been no more obvious than in the arena of politics and social policy where the Enlightenment faith has become most apparent.

Although the Scientific Revolution greatly influenced the growth of Western humanism, even leading it to become the dominant faith of our day, we would not wish to leave the reader with the impression that we think modern science is a product of humanism *per se* and therefore opposed to a Biblically grounded faith and world-view. Modern science would not have arisen at all if it had not been for the fact that Christianity in Western culture had utterly transformed man's understanding of nature. This is particularly true with regards to the doctrine of creation and the way it changed his view of the principle of matter. The material make-up of reality and of man's experience in the world gradually ceased to be viewed, as it had been in Greek thinking, as an alien realm from which his chief purpose was to seek escape or as a part of his nature which he ought above all to suppress.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Christianity de-divinized nature and set it in its proper place as distinct from the God who created and governs it by His providence and will. This revolutionized man's approach to nature and led him to see it not as something to be superstitiously feared, subject to a mysterious and arbitrary supernatural agency, but as a *cosmos*, an order predetermined by God and, because maintained by His providence, a proper place for human endeavor. Nature under Christian influence was seen as subject to man because man was placed over nature and called of God to

6. An excellent discussion of this idea can be found in an essay by M. B. Foster, "The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science" which was published in *Creation: The Impact of an Idea*, ed., Daniel O'Connor and Francis Oakley, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp. 29-53.

exercise a responsible use of it for the benefit of man. While nature has become disturbed because of the intrusion of man's sin it has not ceased to be an ordered arena of human labor and an object upon which man can legitimately employ his powers of intellect to gain knowledge for the good of his life here and now. It is simply that man must remember that he is God's servant, and that nature serves man only to the extent that man serves God according to His will as revealed in Scripture. When man refused to study the workings of natural order with his heart and mind under God, only then did he seek to use science as an instrument of humanistic purpose.

This soon becomes apparent in any study of the history of Western culture. Modern science was seized by a strong humanistic impulse that began, as we indicated, during the Renaissance. While much derived from Christianity's impact on man's thinking, nevertheless a powerful pagan element laid hold of early modern science which came to have a direct and significant effect on the rationale of his pursuit of knowledge. As mentioned, the rediscovery of Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas, with their belief in the essential notion a World-Soul or Reason as the ultimate nature of reality of which the mind of man was a spark, contributed subsequently to the new *scientific* outlook. It was a way of saying that all things were essentially rational and naturally open to minds who share an affinity with rationality and logic. It was accompanied by the emergence of a new Hermeticist religious belief in man as a *Magus*, that is, a magician with latent occult powers to penetrate the hidden depths of the meaning of all reality and thereby to become a *creative* force, who brings reality to its greatest divine-like purpose. That purpose, allegedly, was to re-unite man with his essential divinity which had been lost in a *primal* Fall into ignorance. The goal was to recover man's lost *wisdom* and therewith his power to erect paradise on earth. What is more, the Renaissance saw a great revival of the ancient Pythagorean theory of numbers and mathematics. Reality's secrets lay hidden in mathematical forms which represented the "numinous order emanating from the supreme intelligence."<sup>7</sup> By mastering the principles of number theory man could thereby

decode nature's cryptic meaning and thus conjure from her all her veiled intelligence. He would then acquire the necessary infallibility to manipulate reality for his own self-appointed goals and move the world in which ever direction he chose. These Renaissance ideals stood at the center of early modern science and influenced its agenda in ways we are scarcely any longer aware of.

## 2> *The Second Book*

The cosmology with which we are familiar is scarcely more than three centuries old. A cosmology is a total picture which a person holds of the realm in which he exists: it includes everything from the planet that he inhabits to the vast reaches of outer space. Mainly, it entails a conception of the universe as an orderly system. What, the inquirer seeks to know, is the nature of its order, and how did come about? Can order be said to inhere in the cosmos or does order derive from some outside source? If man can have knowledge of this order, how does he come to know it? And is the order he discovers an absolutely dependable order, that is, does it conform unmistakably to his thought, and his thought to it? In other words, can he be confident that what he knows is true and unerring, and that he is not deceived? In the wake of the new science, many questions of a philosophical nature began to intrude.

It has justly been professed that "[i]n the last analysis it is the ultimate picture which an age forms of the nature of its world that is its most fundamental possession."<sup>8</sup> In this respect, modern *humanist* man has formed a picture of our age that has derived from his preoccupation with the problem of *epistemology*. That is, his chief concern is whether or not he truly knows the world in which he lives and also himself as the knowing mind. Only a world that yields total understanding to the human intel-

7. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, p. 218.

8. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, p. 17.

lect in its quest for *scientific* knowledge interests him. The knowledge man seeks must, in his view, be *certain* knowledge, otherwise it will be thought that he cannot know anything at all. No doubts or reservations may be admitted, nor must we permit man to consult any source in his search for knowledge other than his reason, for then man cannot be sure he knows anything, for knowledge of the world and himself would in that case depend upon something other than his own intellect, and for modern man that would be intolerable because it would not fit his definition of knowledge. The order of the world, not being a product of his reason, would not be completely in his control. In the modern world, the purpose of knowledge is to give man power over his natural environment. Where knowledge is lacking or unachievable, man feels helpless and frustrated. He can only feel confident that he possesses true knowledge if he constructs it himself and is completely certain of what builds. His world-picture must conform to the standard of his reason and not be questioned.

In the Middle Ages man had accepted a picture of the world that was framed by a combination of Aristotelian metaphysics and Biblical revelation. In other words, his world-view was, by and large, a product of a mixture of speculative philosophy and divinely revealed truth. Taken together, man had accepted as true not what he had acquired by way of empirical investigation into nature itself so much as what had been taught him merely as a doctrine of belief. In other words, he took his point of view as a *given*, as handed down from a higher, external authority to which he was required to give his unquestioned assent. In this medieval outlook, truth was thought to derive from a single source, namely, God, either by way of Aristotle, God's chosen pagan philosopher, or Scripture, which was God's way of completing the truth that the pagan mind could not be expected to know on its own. Either way, there was only *one* source of knowledge on all questions of cosmology, an external source, that was principally theological in character because all truth was shaped by questions of faith and morals which concerned man's relationship to God above all else.



In this respect, man in the Middle Ages looked at the world around him not in the categories of time, space, mass, energy, etc., as did modern man, but in those of substance, essence, matter, form, quality, and quantity. The purpose of the natural world was, for the most part, to offer man vast symbols of spiritual and moral meanings. The attention he paid to nature certainly did not go much beyond this. When man approached this world he did so from the perspective of a seeker after *Divine* things, which meant essentially *heavenly* things and things of the *soul*. Although man lived in this world, the world was not ultimately man's goal. Rather than seeing his purpose as defined in terms of this world, he saw it more in terms of the next. If man became interested in questions about this world it was mainly in order to know the divinely appointed destiny of all things. The cosmology of this perspective, we might say, was a matter of place and purpose. Man and his world were *under* God and, in relation to God, small and finite. The world, and everything in it, had its proper, God-appointed location and aim. Man, for example, occupied the center of the world. All other things were seen as tending towards man, and man towards God in Whom all things reached their perfect destiny. Thus, man studied nature in order to know God. His chief purpose was to grasp how all things pointed towards God and served man's highest good which, on earth and eventually in heaven, was to ascend to the highest pleasure of intellectual contemplation of God.

The study of nature in the Middle Ages was thus part of a *higher* purpose. That being so, there was but one source of truth deemed necessary – one book of knowledge – to lead to God. It was preeminently revelation or Scripture, but in the Middle Ages, as previously mentioned, the truth of revelation hardly stood alone. The content was suffused with Greek presuppositions making it difficult for us to decide just what was really *Christian* and what was vitiated by alien pagan ideas. When the attack from early modern science came, we should see it as directed more at the false suppositions of medieval thought on nature as these were derived from Greek philosophy than at a true Biblical understanding. This needs to be kept in mind lest

we think that Christianity and modern science must somehow be completely at odds with one another.

On the other hand, many early modern thinkers came to view science as a source of knowledge and truth by itself. Because it appeared to arise independently of any concern for faith and ethics, they thought it must necessarily have no root in Divine revelation, that is, Scripture. Indeed, they soon believed that there were *two* sources of revelation, each having its own autonomous claim to impart a knowledge of *Divine things*. Just as there was a Book of Scripture from which to learn of things which pertained to *spiritual* matters, so, too, there exists a Book of Nature from which to learn of the phenomena of *matter*.<sup>9</sup> Most essentially, these two Books remain distinct and separate as sources of truth and knowledge. What this came to mean was that theology, as the study of Scripture, must never interfere in, or pretend that it can intrude into, questions in the domain of natural knowledge. Here only the qualified *scientist* may speak, and his speaking is not to be bound by any limitation or stipulation other than what his mind fathoms from the Book of Nature. The other Book, the Book of Scripture, is of no concern to him as a scientist. In fact, as a source of the study of nature it is of no use whatever. The Book of Nature is all that matters. The catalyst for this changed perspective was to be found in what Franklin L. Baumer described as the “space revolution.”<sup>10</sup>

Modern science was first produced as a new conception of space. Traditionally, the date assigned for when this conception first appeared in history is 1543. That year saw the publication of

9. “Baldly stated two major conceptions evolved during the course of the seventeenth century about the possible relations of science and religion in European society. One can be subsumed under the broadly used metaphor of the two books, the Book of Nature and the Book of Scriptures, both considered equal sources of Christian knowledge, both leading to truth but remaining separate, with distinct languages, modes of expression, institutional arrangements, and areas of specialization.” Frank E. Manuel, *The Changing of the Gods*, (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1983), p. 3.

10. Baumer, *Modern European Thought*, pp. 54 & 55.

one of the most seminal works in the history of the West, *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* (*De Revolutionibus*). The author, who died within months of its publication, was Nicholas Copernicus (1473–1543). The impact of Copernicus's book was not immediately felt, but there is little doubt that, from the moment it first appeared, man's thinking concerning the cosmos would undergo a profound transformation. By the time Isaac Newton completed the work of the "space revolution" in 1687 with the publication of another highly important book, *De Principia Mathematica*, the Copernican Cosmography had become the established orthodoxy. What impact did the new cosmography have on man's cosmology? What role did it play in the shaping of modern humanistic thinking? To find answers to these questions we must re-examine the meaning of *the Copernican Revolution*.

To make sense of the changes which Copernicus's discoveries first brought about, three factors must be mentioned. The first concerned the very important concept of *place* which lay at the center of the medieval world-view. Specifically, it had to do with the place of the earth, and hence man, in the total cosmos. The second, which is related to the first but slightly separate, involved the earth's relationship to heaven. Medieval man thought in terms of a duality, of heaven and earth. The effect of Copernican thought was to eliminate this duality. And, third, we shall need to understand the Copernican use of the new algebra. The method by which Copernicus solved problems of astronomy opened up a whole new understanding of man's approach to questions of knowledge and truth. The first two points, while distinguishable, are closely connected to one another. The last, however, is less intrinsically associated with the other two and can be considered more or less independently of them.

Doubtless it is well-known historically that "[a]t the heart of the Copernican system lies the point which required the most carefully reasoned argument: the attribution of motion to the Earth."<sup>11</sup> For a long time it had been an undisputed truth that the earth was fixed and stationary at the center of the universe. This commonplace assumption derived from a number of tenets.

In the first place, from the perspective of normal, daily experience the earth did not appear to move, whereas everything else in the astronomical realm did. The sun traversed the sky from morning till night each day. At night the moon could be observed to appear in different parts of the sky, certainly at different times of the month and year. The same could be said for the stars and planets. It was clear that movement took place in the heavens. Secondly, this view was provided with a plausible scientific explanation by the Greek astronomer, Ptolemy (AD 127–48). Ptolemy's *Almagest* was the standard textbook on astronomy in the Middle Ages. According to it, the earth occupied the center of the *cosmos* and all the planets, including the sun, revolved in perfect circular motion around the earth. It was a clear and orderly presentation with exposition backed up by an array of mathematical and geometrical theorems and diagrams that by and large accounted for both the movement and the position of the various celestial bodies reasonably well.

But, in the third place, perhaps the most persuasive reason derived from the *metaphysics* of the Middle Ages, a peculiar concoction, as we said, of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology. For Aristotle, the earth belonged at the center because it was a heavy element composed chiefly of matter, and matter always *descends* to its natural place. Moreover, the cosmos was a circle, the shape of absolute perfection and wholeness. According to Aristotle, heavy matter always sought the center whereas the lighter, more ethereal substances tended towards the outer circumference. It was natural for the earth to be at the center, whereas the sun, stars and planets, being of lighter material would seek to *ascend* towards the outer reaches of the cosmos. This explanation was equally important to Christian thinkers who reckoned the earth to be at the center because it had to occupy the pivotal place in God's scheme of creation. "[I]f the Earth were not at the center, what happened to the dignity of man? Had not God created the universe for man's enjoyment,

11. Marie Boas, *The Scientific Renaissance, 1450–1630*, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 78.

and put the Earth at the center to prove it?"<sup>12</sup> The exalted place and purpose of man was seen to be in question in medieval thinking if he occupied any place in the creation other than the center. Furthermore, the earth must remain stationary and all other celestial bodies move in order to demonstrate that God's principal concern was with man and the place he inhabited. Finally, the hierarchical ideology at the heart of the medieval vision of man and society would have been overthrown and Christian truth subverted without a stationary earth-centered cosmos.

In this medieval scheme a sharp distinction was made between earth and heaven. The terrestrial realm, being matter of one sort, was viewed as involving problems of movement and change which could not apply to the celestial realm, being matter of a different sort. In fact, the planetary and astral bodies were understood less as matter and more as *lights* attached to crystalline spheres which rolled around in place like gigantic concentric glass balls. The outermost sphere was the region of the stars. Beyond that limit existed the heaven of heavens, the realm of God and angels. The cosmos may be more or less large in scale but it was finite and fixed. The realm of God and the angels alone was infinite and eternal. In medieval thinking the entire cosmos was the *world* of which the earth was but the center. Although astronomical studies were beginning to appreciate that the planets at least were somewhat similar to the earth, nevertheless they were not totally of the same type of material, otherwise they would fall (*descend*) to the earth.

Now it is well known that Copernicus, in order to solve certain discrepancies with respect to the movement of the planetary bodies, replaced the earth with the sun at the center of the cosmos. In other words, the earth itself moved and the sun stood still. This changed perspective was far-reaching in importance. If the earth moved like any other celestial body what did this mean for the centrality of the earth, and therefore for man, in the metaphysics of *Christian* thought? More importantly, if the earth

12. Boas, *The Scientific Renaissance*, p. 87.

moved, then it was no different from other celestial bodies and the distinction between heaven and earth seemed no longer tenable. It came to be assumed that the earth and other planets were the same in substance and so far as their dynamical problems were concerned precisely equivalent. The earth occupied no special place. The distinction between *higher* and *lower* was no longer justifiable, and with it the societal notions which Christian thought had based thereon.

Copernicus undermined, and was recognized to have undermined, the traditional hierarchical cosmic world-order that was necessary to the theological system of medieval Christian thought. In time, humanist thinkers would seize upon Copernican ideas to attack the church and the message of redemption and order for which, despite the thick overlay of Aristotelian influence, it for so long had stood. If the Christian scheme was wrong at one point, so the reasoning went, then it could be wrong at every point. If man could dispense with its cosmology, then he could equally disregard its moral and religious beliefs. The humanism of the Renaissance now had the *science* it needed to eliminate the last vestiges of Christianity and a solid reason to expect that all areas of man's life especially could be redefined along lines of his own choosing. Copernicanism held out great appeal for radical thinkers everywhere who wanted to undermine the ecclesiastically dominated social order and replace it with a secular civic order conceived in accordance with ancient Greco-Roman designs.

It must be said, however, that Copernicus's sun-centered solar system, with its removal of the earth from the center, did not by itself affect to bring about a new humanistic outlook. It is often claimed that simply by removing the earth from the center of the universe man lost the high sense of his own importance and dignity in the scheme of God's creation. In fact, in the medieval view of things, although the earth was at the center of the world, it was there not so much because it represented some position of honor and esteem, but because, being material, it was at the lowest place in the hierarchy of value. As Lovejoy perceptively observed, "[T]he geocentric cosmography served rather

for man's humiliation than for his exaltation...."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, so far as Copernicus himself was concerned, he merely wanted to solve certain vexing astronomical problems which he believed were not adequately accounted for in the Ptolemaic system. It was not his intention to overthrow the entire medieval world-view and reduce man's life to a pitiless irrelevance. It actually never occurred to most people, any more than it occurred to Copernicus, that man's dignity was dependent upon his place in the cosmos. Rather, if anything, man was unique because he possessed what no other creature possessed, namely, a *soul* that reflected the image of his Maker. What is more, he alone, among all God's creatures, was the object of God's redemptive purposes. Copernican theory did not by itself undermine this. Though the *world* was no longer the center geographically, it was still within a totally limited universe which contained no creatures of higher value in God's purposes than man.<sup>14</sup> Copernicus's world-view was still a finite one; he continued to believe in the celestial orbs and crystalline heavenly spheres.

Copernicanism did, however, introduce a distinction between what *is* and what *appears* as motion in the sky, thereby introducing a feeling of relativity of place and motion from the standpoint of the observer.<sup>15</sup> If man lived in a world that was relative from man's observation, perhaps other things were a matter of perspective as well. Thus, for example, how did the Christian doctrine of "ascension into heaven" fit into a cosmological perspective in which *up* could no longer have any absolute meaning? What science taught and what common sense perceived came into conflict, and men who sought for a ground of certainty in thought must soon despise the language of common sense. In time, the idea of the spheres, with the connotation of limitation

13. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of The History of an Idea*, (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1960), pp. 101 & 102.

14. In the Copernican world of thought the *earth* became the *world* and the *cosmos* became the *universe*. This change did not necessarily derive from Copernicus, but was due to the input of others.

15. Lovejoy, p. 107.

and finiteness that their notion implied was shattered and, at the same time, it destroyed the idea that the universe had a center to it in any sense. There was then introduced the further idea that perhaps given the topography of a limitless universe man was not the sole rational being to have exclusive claim to be God's unique creature and, therefore, the crown of his creation. This notion, however, came from philosophy, not the science of astronomy. But before we can say more on this point let us first understand the last implication of Copernican thought, namely, the use of abstract mathematical reasoning in calculating the new formula of a sun-centered solar system.

Because Copernicus proved to be such a threat to the Church's theology, since the latter had based its vision of truth and order on an earth-centered cosmology, naturally opposition to his new ideas quickly flared up. But we should not think that resistance to him was solely a matter of theology. There were many solid rational (i.e., *scientific*) objections as well.<sup>16</sup> The Ptolemaic cosmos was no mere philosophical convenience. Many celestial phenomena were accounted for with great accuracy by Ptolemy's explanations. Indeed, Copernicus accepted most of it, but felt that perhaps certain of its unexplained problems could make better sense by simply having the earth and sun trade places.<sup>17</sup> In this, Copernicus succeeded. However, in order to accomplish his purpose, Copernicus needed to approach astronomical phenomena from a point of reference other than the earth. To do this, he must mentally abstract from observed experience and make his calculations based solely upon an *ideal* perspective. This was made possible on the basis of the new algebra which "freed men's minds from dependence on spatial representations in their mathematical thinking...."<sup>18</sup> Copernicus had dis-

16. See, especially, Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, pp. 36 & 37.

17. I make no comment upon what is sometimes alleged, namely, that Copernicus was influenced by the Neoplatonic-Hermetic belief in the divinity of the sun and for this reason wished to see the sun at the center of the cosmos rather than the earth.

18. Burt, p. 42.



covered a tool which would allow him to re-draw the map of reality without having to depend upon his senses. This, more than the idea of a sun-centered solar system, is what makes Copernicus the founder of the Scientific Revolution.

The sixteenth century had witnessed a great revival of mathematics. It first emerged from the demands of technical problems of engineering, navigation and, especially, warfare. But its use in the re-definition of spatial conceptions is what proved to be its most important legacy to Western civilization. For mathematics detached itself from dependency upon sense awareness and geometrical depiction. By means of algebraic symbols, men began to examine geometrical *ideal* space rather than the spatial relationships that appeared from the standpoint of the spectator. In other words, thought no longer needed to see *real* objects. So far as the motion of celestial bodies was concerned, thought was set free from an earth-bound perspective. The effect was to relativize man's perspective, and the perspective of one body to another, within the whole spatial system. Instead of having to look at the phenomena from the standpoint of the earth, ideal objects could be looked at from *outside* the phenomena. There no longer was a fixed starting-point for thought, having no center or periphery. What is more, Copernicus appeared to have accomplished this without reference to anything but his own reasoning. In other words, he did not rely upon revelation or any outside authority whatever. The possibilities for man's intellect were seen to be truly radical and liberating.

From this beginning, the new relative mathematical perspective encouraged the belief that *all* phenomena could be ultimately reduced to their mathematical proportions.<sup>19</sup> "Mathematics reflected the unchanging reality behind the flux and uncertainty of the world of the senses...to study nature was to search for the mathematical laws which govern the world."<sup>20</sup> All knowledge, then, becomes mathematical knowledge, and nothing that could not be grasped mathematically could be

19. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, p. 53.

20. Boas, *The Scientific Renaissance*, p. 198.

judged knowledge. Knowledge was true knowledge only if it was *certain* knowledge, and no other form of so-called knowledge than what is discovered by mathematical reasoning could possibly fit that description. The realm of God, the soul, and matters of the *spirit* could no longer be described as having any place in modern science's vision of knowledge. All concerns of morals and religion in general were relegated to matters of *faith* which had nothing in common with the ideal of certainty in the new mathematical epistemology. Furthermore, in the realm of nature, the tool of mathematics alone was sufficient to examine and know its workings. The things of faith were outside the province of nature and natural knowledge. In the end, truth attached only to knowledge derived from mathematically based scientific methods. The mind of man had acquired a new "master principle" thereby giving him a new and autonomous sovereignty over the world of his experience.

Copernicus, however, accounted for only one side of the "space revolution." As Baumer also mentions, there was another side which had no intrinsic connection to Copernicus but which, when attached to Copernican astronomy, became a potent combination that would then provide modern humanism with the weapon it needed to discard Christianity. On the one side, "the truly radical innovation introduced by the Copernican cosmology [was] its destruction of the old dualism of earth and heavens... [along with its reduction of] all nature to one system, homogeneous in substance, and subject to the same [mathematical] laws." But on the other side was to be found the belief in a universe conceived as spatially infinite and infinitely populous.<sup>21</sup> This conception did not originate in the work of science, but owed its idea to an earlier revival of ancient Greek philosophy (Pythagorean) in the Renaissance. It was only after Copernicus had published his theories that men with such speculative notions in mind were able to seize upon them and suffuse them with their own profane assumptions. The man most responsible for articulating this second side of the space revolution was Gior-

21. Baumer, *Modern European Thought*, pp. 54 & 55.

dano Bruno (1548–1600). However, even before Bruno, Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), a prominent ecclesiastic who eventually became a cardinal, had already adopted the new speculative thought on behalf of Christian doctrine.

With the revival of Neoplatonic speculative ideas regarding a World-Soul as the *spiritual* essence of all material being, many ecclesiastics and so-called Christian thinkers were eagerly attracted to the possibilities that such conceptions might have for Christian doctrine. It enabled some to introduce an idea of God that would liberate Him from the confines of the role He played in scholastic thought. In the latter, God was more an object of thought, whose place in the realm of being was at the top, than a personal deity whom man worshipped and adored. Moreover, it was claimed that He stood at the conclusion of man's chain of reasoning, thereby ensuring that the goal of all man's thought would conform in all respects to the highest reaches of the hierarchy of being. Man's destiny was to ascend to an intellectual knowledge of the truth which he then contemplates in its undiluted purity. Knowledge in this scheme meant a knowledge of the truth of *being*, and God was the highest form of being. Hence, knowledge of God was truth of the highest order. But what practical value did such a knowledge possess? What good could be found in it for man other than merely to satisfy his intellectual curiosity? More importantly, is it even possible to think that God could be thought of so easily? Was God not vastly beyond man's mind to know? Indeed, who is man that he should even pretend to have knowledge of so great a being as God?

Nicholas of Cusa, along with others, came to the conclusion that it was highly suppositious, erroneous even, to believe that God could ever be an object of human thought. God was *infinite* and therefore beyond man's puny intellectual resources. But Nicholas went even farther. He claimed that all God's works of creation are equally infinite. He reasoned that God, being infinite, could not limit his actions in creating the universe to something that was less than his own nature. At the very least, the universe is boundless or indeterminate, having no fixed center

and no final resting point for movement or life. Man, then, does not represent anything more than one of God's creatures and the earth is nothing more than one world among an infinity of worlds populated with similar creatures. In an infinite universe all is relative and no distinction exists between an earthly realm and a heavenly realm, for with an infinite universe no such distinction is possible or necessary. Cusa did not arrive at his view by means of the science of astronomy, but borrowed his ideas from Neoplatonic speculation. He then sought merely to give them a Christian veneer. We may never know precisely why he thought this way. Perhaps he thought it was more pious to think of God, and hence of creation, in such a manner as to leave man a puny creature in an ocean of infinity, but, whatever the reasons, his brand of thinking was of revolutionary significance. The implications for a new view of man were not lost on someone like Giordano Bruno.

Bruno, who began his young life as a dedicated Dominican monk, soon abandoned his order and the Christian faith entirely in order to become a *preacher* of a new gospel of the liberation of man from the confines of a predetermined cosmological arrangement and set out to convince any who would listen that man, because he lived in an infinite universe, was infinitely free to pursue whatever pathway suited his fancy. What is more, God was nothing but an infinite power which man could infinitely imitate as a creator of a limitless world of possible meanings. Bruno can hardly contain his enthusiasm at the thought of what an infinite God means for the possibilities of human endeavor:

Thus is the excellence of God magnified and the greatness of his kingdom made manifest; he is glorified not in one, but in countless suns; not in a single world, but in a thousand, I say, in an infinity of worlds. Thus not in vain the power of the intellect which ever seeketh, yea, and achieveth the addition of space to space, mass to mass, unity to unity, number to number, by the science that dischargeth us from the fetters of a most narrow kingdom and promoteth us to the freedom of a truly august realm, which

freeth us from an imagined poverty and straineth to the possession of the myriad riches of so vast a space, of so worthy a field of so many cultivated worlds. This science does not permit that the arch of the horizon that our deluded vision imagineth over the Earth and that by our phantasy is feigned in the spacious ether, shall imprison our spirit under the custody of a Pluto or at the mercy of a Jove. We are spared the thought of so wealthy an owner and subsequently of so miserly, sordid and avaricious a donor.<sup>22</sup>

Bruno's language is guarded, but clear. He appears to want to free God from confinement, indeed from being bound in any way, but it is really man he secretly intends to liberate. When he speaks of "the power of the intellect," he does not mean God's intellect so much as he means man's. The cultivation of many worlds is actually meant to refer to the limitless cultivation of this world, again by man. The references to Jove and Pluto are references to heaven and hell. The notion of the world as bound and finite served a constricting theology of other-worldliness. With the elimination of the need for *other* worlds than this one, since it is sufficiently large in size and open to endless possibilities, why give credence to anything that would distract man from pursuit of the only world that exists? In the name of God and Christianity, Bruno emptied the Christian message of anything having to do with sin and salvation. That message, at its core, was one of needless deprivation for man, hindering and constricting his accomplishments here and now. Instead, Bruno employed the concept of an infinite universe to promote the agenda of an infinite progressive transformation of man's world, by and for man. "There are no ends, boundaries, limits or walls which can defraud or deprive us of the infinite multitude of things."<sup>23</sup> This was Bruno's bold claim and the faith he sought to promote.

22. Giordano Bruno, *De l'infinito universo e mondi*, quoted in Koyre, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, p. 42.

23. Bruno, *De l'infinito universo*, Ibid, p. 44

By means of a new speculative cosmology, Bruno, and soon others, opened modern thought to the concept of an infinite universe, and, although it diminished man to a relative importance opposite other living things, nevertheless, it served as the means to liberate man from the dogma of a pre-given order of things. Since God could not create anything less than an infinite universe filled with infinite worlds populated with infinite individual beings, it may therefore be assumed that man ought not to think of himself as special, either one way or another. Man does not represent God's highest creation and has no greater significance in God's scheme of things than any one of a countless number of other creatures. Consequently, he need not concern himself with whether or not God has any great interest in him. His only concern should be with cultivating his own God-like abilities in order the better to know and fashion the only world he possesses. The goal, then, of this second side of the "space revolution" was to serve the interests of men who sensed a new exhilaration and *power* in a universe which had no final purpose but which lay infinitely open to man in providing endless possibilities to remake his world along lines of his own choosing. Man felt a new power to master nature for the good of man and to do so without reference to anyone other than himself.

The combination of the Copernican cosmography and the belief in an infinite universe has left a profound impact upon the thinking of modern man. More, however, was involved than just positing the idea of an infinite universe. The "space revolution" required an *epistemological* basis in order to provide humanists with the autonomy from God that they so desperately sought. This was made possible by the belief that the universe was a perfect and intrinsic mathematical harmony and that, at bottom, all genuine knowledge is mathematical. Without a knowledge of mathematics it was impossible to know nature in any true sense. Two thinkers who helped to promote this belief were Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) and Galileo Galilei (1564–1642).

Kepler claimed that all reality, both celestial and terrestrial, was one vast mathematical form and that the observed facts of this natural system, so far as knowledge of it was concerned,

reduced to one of quantitative characteristics only, all differences being differences of number alone.<sup>24</sup> "Quantitative features are the sole features of things as far as the world of our knowledge is concerned."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the knowledge in question is discoverable by the common light of reason and is universally applicable to all quantitative entities regardless of any other apparent differences. In this respect, Kepler distinguished between what he termed *primary* and *secondary* qualities in man's experience of nature. The former alone were objects of true knowledge; the latter were mere subjective impressions and therefore unreliable so far as a knowledge of things was concerned. Secondary qualities may attract man's non-intellectual or emotional interests, but they do not constitute objects of genuine knowledge. Only what is quantifiable and countable qualifies as knowledge and, hence, as truth. The world of man's experience was divided between what man felt and what he understood. Faith, and other religious concerns may adhere to the former, but knowledge alone belonged to the latter, and no connection existed between them.

Galileo, while accepting this view, took it one step further. Nature was not merely a mathematically caused entity; it was an "orderly system, whose every proceeding is thoroughly regular and inexorably necessary."<sup>26</sup> Not only is nature not subject to any other ordering principle than that of mathematics, but by means of it alone does it possess a rigorous inevitability. Nature cannot be moved off its course, nor can it be fundamentally altered by other than what is mathematically determinable. The system of nature is eternally what it is. No miraculous or non-natural interventions can interrupt or thwart the workings of nature's necessary movements or arrangements. The only recognizable *miracles* that one may discover in nature are those of mathematical demonstrations which furnish man with the key to unlock the secrets of nature for the sake of improving the quality

24. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, p. 67.

25. Burtt, p. 68.

26. Burtt, p. 74.

of man's life here and now.

It can be justly claimed that Galileo is the first modern man. His statement in *The Assayer* (1623), regularly quoted in works that cover the rise of the modern world, certainly represents the credo of modern humanistic scientism:

Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. *It is written in the language of mathematics*, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.<sup>27</sup>

Here every postulate of modern humanism is summarily articulated. The "grand book" is a metaphor for revelation, hence the fount of all truth and knowledge. But, of course, it has nothing to do with God, for He is not mentioned in the quote, nor is His written word, the Scriptures. It refers to nature as a self-contained world of meaning (philosophy) which man may know and master entirely by means of an autonomous "language" of its own. Mathematics is the secret of nature, its mysterious code by which all its truth is unlocked. To "wander about in the dark" is to lack the knowledge of this code or principle of nature and nothing more. It is strictly a problem of knowledge which confronts man in his task of subduing nature. No other religious or moral aspects of man's being have any bearing on questions of truth and knowledge. The issue is entirely epistemological, a failure to learn mathematics.

Galileo, accordingly, was bound to divide reality, like Kepler, into two dimensions, that of primary and secondary qualities. As Burt notes, "Galileo makes the clear distinction

27. Galileo, *The Assayer*, in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, Stillman Drake (trans.), Doubleday & Co., Garden City, New York. pp. 237–238. The quote is taken from Baumer, *Modern European Thought*, p. 50.



between that in the world which is absolute, objective, immutable, and mathematical; and that which is relative, subjective, fluctuating, and sensible. The former is the realm of knowledge, divine and human; the latter is the realm of opinion and illusion.”<sup>28</sup> The ghost of Plato reappears with the advent of modern thought. All problems of truth are matters of discovering the abstract, absolute reality behind the outer sensed world of material and bodily experience. If man is deceived, if he is lost and confused, it is only because he regards his senses as trustworthy and fails to see their illusive features. Man’s basic problem is how to overcome the uncertainty of knowledge. All the issues of his life turn upon his ability to grasp the mathematical object (number, figure, magnitude, position, and motion) which rests concealed underneath the sensed object. However, in man’s reason there lies the *power* to decode and penetrate to the real world of objective and absolutely certain knowledge of all that exists. He need consult nothing but the language of the grand book of nature.

Along with a new definition of reality, Galileo introduced a new definition of God that alone was acceptable to the new scientific-mathematical mind. God, for Galileo, is essentially a great geometrician who fashioned the entire world by means of mathematical concepts. These concepts are the exact same ones discovered by man. If any difference obtains in the sort of knowledge which God possesses and man seeks to possess, it lies only in the nature of complete and incomplete knowledge. That is, God’s is finished and perfect, whereas man’s is inconclusive and partial. However, this difference between man and God in the matter of knowledge is merely a quantitative one. God has more of it. But man is gradually closing the gap. Even so, what man does know he knows with as equal degree of truth and certainty as God. Thus so far as Galileo was concerned, as Burtt mentions, “God knows infinitely more propositions than we, but yet in the case of those we understand so thoroughly as to perceive the necessity of them, i.e., the demonstrations of pure

28. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, p. 83.

mathematics, our understanding equals the divine in objective certainty.”<sup>29</sup> Only mathematical knowledge is certain knowledge, and man’s knowledge in this respect is as good as God’s.

In Galileo’s thought “the real world must be the world outside of man; the world of astronomy and the world of resting and moving terrestrial objects. The only thing in common between man and this real world was his ability to discover it....”<sup>30</sup> In other words, man’s connection to the world in which he exists does not go beyond his ability to disclose its hidden mathematical meaning. Reality possesses no other purpose for human life. In philosophical terms, Galileo abandons all notions of *final causality* as a principle of the explanation of nature, whether we mean the outer environment or human nature specifically. The world does not manifest any purpose for which it exists beyond an intrinsic mathematical necessity. Aim or design, the language of final causality, cannot be understood from the categories of space and time which Galileo took to be fundamental. Moreover, since these also cannot be comprehended in the movement of objects in nature, they have no meaning in the language of science. Only what has measure and number pertains to the real world of mathematically reducible motions. What is more, motion in this real world is theoretically infinite in duration and extension so that mathematical calculations never arrive at anything like a final goal, whether at the end or at any particular juncture. In other words, the world does not have any destination or end, only an infinitely continuous mathematical activity.

Not surprisingly man, with his time as *lived*, becomes a great problem. What does *being alive* mean other than to function and exist? The movement of time, since it conforms inexorably to mathematical necessity, stands indifferent to human purpose or endeavor. Man is nothing more than an irrelevant spectator of the vast mathematical system of the universe. Even if man can justify his existence as one who thinks the thoughts of

29. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, p. 82.

30. Burt, pp. 89 & 90.

the universe, and thereby translate that thought into man-enhancing or improving goals, the question why he should do so cannot be answered with any greater satisfaction than that it will supposedly add to his stock of material well-being, how ever that may be defined. Beyond this, explaining the nature of man's well-being itself becomes a problem once it becomes clear that the world of mathematical necessity can as easily detract from as add to it, with no particular reason for doing so one way or the other. But these considerations only began to perplex the modern mind at a much later date. In the meantime, we should not fail to understand where modern humanism began, namely, with the assertion of reality as mathematically determined.

If there is no final causality for the world, if movement in nature has no goal or purpose, then what role does God play? He plays, in Galileo's estimation, a purely *scientific* role, that is, He fills in as the necessary *first* cause. Something or someone is needed to start the process of motion according to mathematical necessity in operation. After that, however, God ceases to retain any usefulness for scientific thought. In fact, His usefulness in this respect, which will become clearer as modern science develops, is limited to the time when God was still needed to supply the gap in man's knowledge of the origins of things. He will be discarded as soon as man happens upon an explanation more suitable to his humanistic fancy. Once again, Burtt indicates what this means: "God... ceases to be the Supreme Good in any important sense; he is a huge mechanical inventor, whose power is appealed to merely to account for the first appearance of the atoms, the tendency becoming more and more irresistible as time goes on to lodge all further causality for whatever effects in the atoms themselves."<sup>31</sup>

No doubt, Galileo thought that by installing God in the role of first cause he thereby retained the necessary Christian conception of God as the Creator. However, to speak of God as merely the first cause was simply to make plain that He was needed to fill in the gap in man's reason. It did not make His

31. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, p. 99.

role as Creator any the less problematic, for a Creator implies the nature of personhood, and personhood implies a purposeful intelligence to His actions. But purpose is precisely what cannot be discovered in the world of primary qualities. It would violate the character of motion and change as mathematically necessary. It would also mean that God's mind transcends man's in so far as knowledge is concerned and thereby renders man's thought devoid of total logical control. Just how God created all things would escape rational explanation. That would mean, then, that truth involves taking a great deal on faith and hence from an authority other than man's mind. Science would not achieve the desired autonomy for man, something that was unacceptable to modern humanism. Thus it quickly became clear that man must discover a principle of causation that was entirely independent of the idea of God. In time, evolution would be invented for that purpose.

Galileo was a great believer in the idea of the Book of Nature, and that man possessed an unqualified ability to read that Book correctly. In fact, "[o]f the two books, science is the nobler expression of God."<sup>32</sup> Scripture, on the other hand, was less reliable because it was primarily addressed to a primitive people who lacked the capability to see the workings of nature scientifically. It is as if he almost meant to say that once mankind had reached the stage of scientific knowledge he stood less in need of Scripture. He was certainly among the first in a long line of modern thinkers to assert that, even though there be two books, the truth about nature could be expounded only by science. He would even go so far as to claim that should any discrepancies arise in what each has to say concerning matters of the natural world, then Scripture ought to be interpreted in the light of modern science. In other words, should something in Scripture happen to conflict with the rules of mathematical reasoning, then statements in Scripture must be explained in such manner that they do not do violence to the autonomy of human thought.

32. Manuel, *The Changing of the Gods*, p. 10.

3. *The Mechanized World of Enlightenment Man*

The importance of the new algebraic geometry for acquiring logical control of the forces of nature is based upon the idea that geometry provided an ideal picture of natural occurrences against which actual events could be measured. Modern science thus created a dualistic world: one was the real world of material happenings and changes; the other was a mathematically perfect world which became the standard knowledge by which real events were to be checked. By the time of the Enlightenment, science had become the respected form of thinking not merely because it produced spectacular results, but because all non-mathematical modes of thought were viewed as incapable of providing the rational control man desired. Non-scientific thought was reduced to superstition and fantasy.

The new science triumphed in Western culture “from the 1680s to the 1720s.”<sup>33</sup> It was accompanied by a new *high* culture which distinguished itself from the so-called culture of the people. It displayed a vigorous and zealous *rationalism* as a new weapon to be used against all authority other than science. The new science was deemed to be a new truth which must necessarily overthrow all previous truth because the latter was based upon error, deception, or deliberate falsehood. All thought that cannot be submitted to the test of science must be dismissed as illusory and useless. It was from this time on that men began to show a new confidence and faith in science to lead to a constant progress and improvement in the human condition. No area of man’s life and activity could escape the need to be grounded upon firm scientific assumptions and demonstrations. All inquiry must, at the same time, be free of any and all *censorship* – free, that is, from all prohibiting dogmas that do not meet the standards of scientific credibility, regardless of the moral and social ramifications.

Science, however, as the only certain knowledge available

33. Margaret C. Jacob, *The Cultural Meaning of the Scientific Revolution*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 105.

to man, needed to be grounded in the certainty of the selfhood of man if man was not to be deceived as to the truth of his knowledge. He must know without a doubt that his thoughts are none other than his own and that they are based entirely upon his own power to think, and that his thinking does not error. A philosophy of the human self as the absolute starting-point of all thought would have to be made available if modern man was not to fall back upon any external source of truth, whether that source be viewed as God or the common prejudices of men. Each individual must be able to stand upon the truth as "clear and distinct" in his own mind without the need to rely upon anyone or anything but what emerged from his own thought-processes. Enlightenment meant principally self-enlightenment which banishes every possibility of uncertainty and skepticism that must undoubtedly arise from other than mathematical modes of thinking. And, most importantly, it must be able to account for all areas of man's life and behavior. René Descartes (1596–1650) has rightly been regarded as the first to articulate a complete philosophy based entirely upon the belief that the new science could be founded upon the certainty of the individual thinking self.

From closely observing what seemed to many to be unbridgeable chasms in the thinking and the society of his day, Descartes felt that if truth was to preserve man from the chaos of disputes and contentions, then it would need to be grounded on some absolute and undoubted foundation. It must be such that all would recognize the truth and give to it their unquestioned allegiance. For this to become possible, a type of knowledge must be found which is not susceptible of error or dispute, and which must compel the assent of all. Despite having rejected all external authority, especially that of revelation, nevertheless, Descartes believed it was necessary to establish some authority, otherwise how could the knowledge which science claims to provide be other than one man's opinion against the next? After all, it was not easy to isolate the purely quantifiable in nature, since it lay embedded in what man sensed and experienced. Confusion was apt to reign because the senses were liable to confound the

*sensed* object with the *real* object which bore solely the property of extension and number. He needed, so he thought, to establish the authority of the mind which thinks as well as the certainty of its mental operations. Since for modern man the great problem was the problem of his knowledge, and since knowledge can only be achieved by a mind which thinks, it is absolutely necessary to be able to found the starting-point for knowledge in an infallible mind. But for Descartes there can be no universal or transcendent Mind; there is only the radically subjective individual mind. Yet, knowledge must be general and universal, otherwise it is nothing more than conjecture. It would lack logical necessity and remain purely subjective, thereby ending in skepticism and complete lack of certainty. How to guarantee the truth of knowledge and at the same time protect the independence and autonomy of the thinking self was the issue to be resolved.

Science, under the influence of Descartes, came to mean a type of knowledge in which the *individual* thinker was the highest authority. To confirm this, Descartes, at the beginning of the modern era, set out upon a philosophical quest wherein he sought for an unerring method that would guarantee the absolute certainty of the thinking self. It was a method which, as he proudly proclaimed in his *Discourse on Method*, would examine all known bases of knowledge, whether these meant the inherited tradition of the ages or the practical activities of contemporary peoples and customs, only thereafter to conclude that each and every opinion and belief, while interesting or perhaps useful, was insufficient to provide the ground of truth which the thinker required if he was not to be deceived or dependent on other than what he could be absolutely certain. All so-called claims of truth or knowledge which men have offered for whatever reason are, in Descartes's method, to be swept completely away until he has been able to establish the certainty of his own mind and thereby with the power to subject all truth-claims to its radically independent authority.<sup>34</sup> In Descartes's view, as Professor Jacob has shown, "[o]nly the self, more precisely, the thinking mind – 'I think, therefore I am' – can be taken as given. The first obligation of the scientific person is to embark on an intellectual odys-

sey that begins in doubt and ends with the affirmation of self.”<sup>35</sup> Once the “radical charter” of the individual sovereign self has been ratified in this journey of self-discovery, then all knowledge, from whatever source, must justify itself before the authority of the potentate of the mind.

Descartes found his answer, so he thought, in the belief that while it was possible to doubt the existence of everything else, it was not possible for the thinker to doubt his own existence. For even to doubt his own existence was to confirm it, for one could not doubt if one did not exist. So much must be certain – the existence, and therewith the certainty of his thought, of the thinker who cannot eliminate his existence from his own thinking. Descartes now had the absolute starting-point in the self that he desired for all truth claims.

It became a cardinal doctrine of Enlightenment humanism to claim that each man could be the judge of what was true and what was false. It was assumed that he could examine all propositions with an infallible science and know beyond doubt every claim to be either the one or the other. The certainty lay within himself because, as Descartes had shown, whatever else may be subject to questioning and uncertainty, one thing remained beyond doubt, namely, the thinking existence of the individual self. That much being certain, it was possible to accept that the mind’s ideas about the world and man were at least as certain as the person’s knowledge of his own existence. If man can reason truly about himself, then he can reason truly about the world. The hidden agenda in this philosophical program was the belief that man did not have to regard anything as true if it did not conform to the standard of his own mental processes. What came to him as authoritative outside his own mind he may naturally regard as nothing but an opinion which he may treat with indifference or outright denial. Specifically, this meant that any truth said to come from God may be dismissed until the mind estab-

34. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. I, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, (Cambridge: At The University Press, 1973), pp. 83–91.

35. Jacob, *The Cultural Meaning of the Scientific Revolution*, p. 60.



lishes the truth of God's existence and veracity. Of course, Descartes liked the idea of a God because it was to him a guarantee of his own thoughts. But should man decide that the truth of his thoughts does not require any external guarantee, as was to become the case in the further unfolding of Enlightenment ideals, then all such notions would be readily dismissed, even attacked with hostility. No criterion of truth stands higher than the thinking self.

The influence of Cartesianism for Enlightenment ideals was its proclamation, then, of "the self as the first arbitrator of knowledge...."<sup>36</sup> It gave out that scientific knowledge was the only way *to think for oneself* as over against accepting anything on the basis of external authority, custom or tradition. What man's science could not confirm with certainty must be consigned to primitive superstition and the vulgar imagination of uncultured savages. It was supposed that, in the past, men were driven by fear and an untutored ignorance evoked by strange cataclysms and frightful natural disasters which made them imagine that nature was arbitrarily manipulated by a frightful Deity who was responsible for the calamities which overtook them. In time, there arose a powerful elite to bind men's conscience with *priestly* religion and spoil their natural optimism with respect to nature's order and coherent goodness. Cartesianism looked to free man's mind from such a primitive residue and thereby encourage the belief that man could direct his life by means of his own thoughts which, being "clear and distinct" as based upon correct scientific thinking, would alleviate the need to rely upon any authority but himself. Man must be willing to start with himself and rely upon his own judgments in all questions of truth and knowledge. What is more, only man the individual is true reality. All other associations and agencies are merely conventional or habitual and must be deemed obstacles in the quest for truth and knowledge. The individual must be bound only to himself and the certainty of his own thoughts. This Cartesian legacy would be promoted whenever and wherever anyone felt

36. Jacob, *The Cultural Meaning of the Scientific Revolution*, p. 57.

the need to proclaim the individual's radical liberation from all suffocating influences of culture and civilization, especially if it concerned matters of religion and ethics.

In the new mathematical science nature became a self-determined system. The only concern of science was to know the law of causality in nature thereby to grasp its intrinsic necessity and its movement as a continuous and predictable occurrence. Nature and causality in nature were one and the same, and were purely objective phenomena that could be explained on the basis of an impersonal mathematical model. This being so, nature possessed no intrinsic purpose; or, rather, purpose must be imputed to nature and man's mind, as Cartesianism had supposed, is the only instrument for doing so. The man most responsible for divining that purpose and giving to modern humanism its sense of calling was Francis Bacon (1561–1626).

For Bacon, the only purpose which nature possessed for men was their mastery of nature. Baconian thought "gave rise to [the] characteristically modern belief in the unlimited human ability to conquer nature by rational methods combined with an unshakable confidence in a state of universal happiness that would follow from this conquest."<sup>37</sup> As Bacon ardently professed, "[T]he real and legitimate goal of the sciences, is the endowment of human life with new inventions and riches."<sup>38</sup> For Bacon, truth meant science, and science meant power over nature in order to benefit mankind. Knowledge meant a type of salvation, not only from ignorance, but also from hardship and the life of mere animal existence. Clearly, "Bacon's call for unlimited control over nature rested on the assumption that nature possessed no purpose of its own.... [Consequently,] he eliminated final causality from scientific investigation...[and] placed the entire responsibility for conveying meaning and purpose to the world entirely on the human person, the only crea-

37. Louis Dupre, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 73 & 74.

38. *Novum Organum*, in *The World's Great Classics*, (New York: The Colonial Press, 1899), p. 339.

ture endowed with purposiveness.”<sup>39</sup> Nature existed to serve man according to man’s desire for self-satisfaction. A knowledge of nature which did not achieve practical results to this end was less than useless; indeed, it was positively harmful.

In Baconian thinking, then, the technical imperative of knowledge summons the expertise of the goal-defining human agent. Once again, the method for accomplishing this end is by reducing all experience to purely abstract, quantifiable dimensions. However, Bacon added another factor to this program, namely, the need to be rigorously experimental. In this peculiar English contribution to Enlightenment thought the scientist proceeds to the study of nature not simply by the method of deductive analysis, but by an equally inductive empirical investigation of the physical and material properties of natural objects. The result of this approach to nature has been to define nature’s movements and properties along the lines of mechanical operations which are the only features of nature which knowledge can discover for endowing human life with “inventions and riches.” Nature becomes a vast machine which functions in accordance with an inexorable regularity. Even the life of man himself is subject to the same law of mechanical constancy and uniformity. This being so, knowledge not only meant power over the *forces* (a Newtonian term) of nature, but power over men and society. Even as man can engineer the workings of nature to benefit his life, so, too, he can superintend the workings of society to create better order and harmony between human beings. Indeed, in the new Enlightenment faith, the two were viewed as being necessarily interrelated. Baconian optimism allowed modern man to think that he could erect culture and civilization from a blueprint discovered in nature by an infallible method of reasoning. It was simply a matter of searching for the facts and piecing them together with the logic of his mind.

However, if society could be engineered, what did this mean for the autonomous individual? And if man was machine-like in his physical properties, which were the only ones which

39. Dupre, *Passage to Modernity*, p. 72.

had any meaning so far as genuine knowledge was concerned, what did this mean for the freedom and creative initiative of the sovereign individual? It was questions such as these which would to return to haunt Enlightenment man in the next stage of Western history known as the Romantic period.

In the meantime, let us carefully understand that the Enlightenment inherited the Renaissance belief in man as a creative power in nature. Indeed, he alone gives value or meaning to the total realm of being. In this respect, man does not just give to nature what is intrinsic to nature, but he recasts nature to conform to human want and aspiration. Man becomes the controlling agent. But, in order to accomplish this design, nature must be remade into a means of human cognitive control. In the end, nature becomes increasingly mechanical and impersonal, a strictly objective phenomenon upon which the mind of man operates with a purpose supplied entirely by the mind itself. Inwardly, man thinks of himself as free and sovereign, but externally he is determined by the realm of compulsion. Eventually, man comes to feel closed in by an external environment which functions according to unbreakable laws that do not exempt man. The requirements of epistemology, in order that man may be a *creative* agent, seems to lead to the conclusion that, in order to know nature, it must become totally self-contained and predictable. As it turned out, a predictable nature became the enemy of freedom and power. The solution of this problem was then sought in Romanticism with its cult of mystery and the irrational.

## 8 • *Romanticism*

### *The Revolution Ideal*

#### *1> A Culture of Protest & Protest as Culture*

For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains... well pleased to recognize  
In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.

– *Tintern Abbey*, Wm. Wordsworth

It has been justly remarked that whereas “science dictated the ‘outer’ cosmology: the character of nature, man’s place in the universe, and the limits of his real knowledge,” it was the role of Romanticism “to inspire the West’s ‘inner’ culture – its art and literature, its religious and metaphysical vision, its moral ideals...”<sup>1</sup>

This comment portrays for us an important fact of humanism's development in the modern world: its dualistic and antithetical character. Up till now we have attempted to show that it was Plato's central ideal of *power-through-reason*, as it was thought to be manifest in certain naturally endowed individuals, that has come to dominate Western humanism's aspirations for culture and civilization. While in the vision of Homer reason appeared to be initially absent, and in the ideals of Monasticism it looked as though it were sublimated or suppressed, nevertheless, in both, men were inspired by the conception of a culture formed by an especially privileged elite whose strength of purpose and will, being divinely infused, would act as the locus of all real power and order in the cosmos. Even so, by the eighteenth century it was Plato's agenda – the program of *scientia*, science! – which would appear to have totally triumphed. But precisely at that moment, when victory seemed assured, a new cultural force came on the scene, one that at times appeared to compliment, while at other times to act as a destructive solvent to, Western humanistic scientism, namely, the protest culture of Romanticism.

It has not been an easy matter to decide exactly when and where this thing called Romanticism first appeared. Some claim it began in Germany, others in England, mainly among poets in the late eighteenth century. A third opinion, however, has not hesitated to assert that one man, in particular, has been not only the first but, perhaps, the most important of all the Romantics, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>2</sup>

With this latter opinion, we find it hard to disagree. It is not that Romanticism failed to show peculiar propensities among others, it certainly did; we wish merely to point out that it was Rousseau who first gave vent to the modern Romantic *faith*. Moreover, he did so not, as is usually thought, in his 1761 novel,

1. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, p. 11.
2. "Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the first of the Romantics...with the publication in 1761 of *La nouvelle Heloise*, the original romantic novel." Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), p. 1.

*Heloise*, but in 1750 in *The First Discourse on Inequality* for which the young Rousseau won first prize in a celebrated essay competition. In this regard, we may emphasize a general feature illustrative of the movement in Rousseau, to wit, that “[r]omanticism began... as a protest of youth against the standards of their elders... a revolt against classicism, which seemed... to stifle all that was creative and spontaneous in artistic expression...”<sup>3</sup> A chief feature of Romanticism, one that will be a continuing trait right up to the present, can be found in its character as a “protest of youth,” a “revolt” of the young against all that went before as the considered principles of truth, goodness and cultural order.

Rousseau (1712–1778) typifies not simply a revolt of youth against one’s immediate elders. Much more importantly he stands for a radical departure from the faith which humanism had sought to discover, from the Greeks up to his day, as the *master principle* of *reason* that would enable the mind of man to acquire the control of reality, making it possible for him to become the source of all order in the world and the sole determiner of his civilization. This faith, as we pointed out in the last chapter, had achieved a significant break-through with the Scientific Revolution and came to expression in the eighteenth century as *Enlightenment*. However, far from having arrived at the goal, the Enlightenment for many rather marked simply the beginning. For, supposedly, the new science of mechanics, along with the mathematics on which it was based, was only just starting to emerge from the darkness of ignorance and religious superstition. Great progress, of course, had already been made, but even greater was expected in the future to lead mankind unto the goal of perfection. And science would be the only instrument to guide them in that direction. Man’s happiness would increase in proportion to his increase in knowledge and control of the forces of nature. It was over this Enlightenment faith in progress through science that Rousseau first cast a huge shadow of doubt.

3. Gordon A. Craig, *The Germans*, (New York, A Meridian Book, 1991), p. 191.

For Rousseau, as for others who would follow in his path, the whole reason enterprise, as it had reached its nadir in man's supreme confidence in science and the culture he had produced by means of it, was nothing more than a colossal absurdity at best and a contemptible deception at worst. Modern scientific culture, far from having lifted man to greater heights, had in fact degraded and perverted him. For, says Rousseau, in his *First Discourse*, "our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our sciences and arts toward perfection."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the growth of civilization, in particular the growth of knowledge, had led not to man's betterment, but to his debasement. What Rousseau implied was not that earlier cultures, whether medieval or ancient, had any advantage over the modern era in this respect. Rather, he meant to say that the primitive and pre-civilizational state of mankind, in which man had existed in some remote past long before he ever set out on the quest for discovery and learning, was far better and certainly a happier one than when men first began to acquire the rudiments of knowledge and civilization. Thus, Rousseau introduced what would become an abiding truth for Romantic idealists, namely, the superiority of man in the state of untrammelled nature, man without the artificiality of culture and society which have only served to spoil and vulgarize him with contrived conventions and outwardly imposed social mores. "One cannot reflect on morals," laments Rousseau, "without delighting in the recollection of the simplicity of earliest times. It is a lovely shore, adorned by the hands of nature alone, toward which one incessantly turns one's eyes and from which one regretfully feels oneself moving away."<sup>5</sup> It was, in his view, a land of innocence and virtue, a time when men were wont to live together in harmony and peace unaffected by the tumult of feverish wants and the insatiable ambitions which have become the lot of men in the modern world. What Rousseau ignited with this revision of val-

4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, (New York: St. Marten's Press, 1964), p. 39.

5. *First Discourse*, pp. 53, 54.



ues among those who came afterwards in the Romantic era was a longing to cast off the culture of the West and to seek for a new freedom in a strange new and mysterious world of primal nature. Not progress toward the future, but revolt would come to intrude upon the agenda of Western man.

Nothing captures the spirit of Romanticism quite like the yearning of men to be *free*. Here we do not mean *free* in some limited political or, perhaps, merely academic sense, but rather a total freedom. On the negative side, it meant a freedom from all restricting social and moral conventions and arrangements, all traditions and established or accepted dogmas of religion or of the intellect in general, all confining relationships of whatever sort that were not conducive to an individual's self-decided personal happiness. However, the Romantic idea of freedom, far from being solely negative, at the same time, implied a positive desire to be free to re-make all things according to a vision which would emanate from the inner depths of man's soul. It was thought that anything external to the will or desire of man could only impede the soul's longing to achieve total self-authenticity. Only when man is completely autonomous can he then find and recover his true self and in the same act achieve a world of happiness on his own behalf. This legacy of Rousseau has become a chief feature of Romanticism and remains a foremost article of faith among many, if not most, cultural humanists of the present day.

This longing for freedom was felt in Western culture well before the Romantic period. As we shall see, Romanticism, in many respects, simply stirred the embers of an ideal which had long been smoldering and oft-times flared up, but which seemed to have been nearly extinguished by the time of the Enlightenment. In Western culture, it was Christianity which first kindled the flame of freedom, for it stood for the possibility of a radical freedom from *sin* which was viewed as the primary agency in the enslavement of men and nations. However, in the further unfolding of its idea, the Christian message was often influenced by the older pagan and neo-pagan ideas of freedom as meaning the escape from creaturehood and finite materiality. As a result,

the Christian component in this mixture was almost entirely obliterated. In the meantime, we should understand that Romanticism, in its view of the freedom of man, had deep roots in this earlier world of thought. Yet, it appeared in a much more humanistic guise and more positively as offering an agenda of its own and not simply as propounding a doctrine of escape. Freedom for Romantics was a call for a new world-order and was seen as the *power* of the will to produce it.

An agenda or program that is built on so radical a notion of freedom from all given order is difficult to define. The very concept of an agenda implies an order itself. Romantics meant to construct an order of their own while at the same time that they rejected all so-called order as a denial of freedom. Undismayed, they reveled in this mysterious contradiction and clung resolutely to the belief that freedom was its own order, albeit not a given order, rather a permanently on-going achievement. Freedom can never be a given or conclusive state; one lives constantly in the attempt to attain it. Without a final order to characterize freedom, it is only possible to speak of it as an act, as something toward which we ought invariably to strive. In the end, freedom can mean nothing positive, it is merely negative. Freedom must be found in a perpetual rebellion from all previous order. Permanent revolution becomes the only program that Romanticism can espouse despite whatever else it might claim to believe in.

This thought is best expressed by the not-so-well-known nineteenth century Russian anarchist, Michael Bakunin, who noisily declared: "Let us trust the eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternally creative source of all life. The joyful passion of destruction is a creative passion."<sup>6</sup> It is the same as to say that life is made possible through death, a tenet no doubt also borrowed from Christianity but with a thoroughly different message to it. For death meant to Romantics not the death of the self to its lusts and evil

6. The quote is taken from Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment To Revolution*, ed. John H. Hallowell, (Durham, Duke University Press, 1975), p. 198.

desires but the death of all that stood in the way of total personal self-fulfillment. Consequently, while Romanticism is often portrayed as a revolt against rationalism, in another sense it is the culmination of rationalism in that it derives from the same urge to master and control reality, and to bring to completion the quest for *Gnosis* as a superior grasp of the totality of existence in order to realize a paradise for man. Only the Gnosis sought after was not so much to be found in the intellect as it reflects on an objective reality as in the will and the deeper stirrings of the heart out of which would arise the only reality that was admissible.

From a historical perspective, Romanticism has been said to contrast with the classical view. Classicism, as noted, is the term most often used to describe the culture of the Enlightenment. The latter represented a vision of culture that conformed to unvarying standards as first propounded in the artistic accomplishments of the classical heritage of Greece and Rome but which had been transformed by the Enlightenment's obsession with geometrical exactness. It emphasized a supposedly objective, whether divine or rational, order which it is the responsibility of all men to study, submit to, and obey. In classicism knowledge of the truth was sought in universal, idealized form. Lovejoy has captured the essential characteristic of this outlook:

For in nearly all the provinces of thought in the Enlightenment the ruling assumption was that Reason...is the same in all men equally possessed by all; that this common reason should be the guide of life; and therefore that universal and equal intelligibility, universal acceptability, and even universal familiarity, to all normal members of the human species, regardless of differences of time, place, race, and individual propensities and endowments, constitute the decisive criterion of validity or of worth in all matters of vital human concernment....<sup>7</sup>

"The Enlightenment was, in short, an age devoted, at least in its dominant tendency, to the simplification and the standard-

7. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 289.

ization of thought and life....”<sup>8</sup> With the outgrowth of modern science in this period a vigorous effort was made to transform all knowledge into quantitative forms. It was believed that, by doing so, thought would be freed from all subjective distortions, that is, from all ethical, aesthetic, emotional, imaginative or intentional qualities of human experience. Such was deemed necessary if man was to achieve the goal of perfect and certain knowledge. But the result was that “a certain spiritual nobility seemed to have departed from it [man’s knowledge]” and man felt a profound impoverishment of soul. To the Romantics, “[t]he new universe was a machine, a self-contained mechanism of force and matter, devoid of goals or purpose, bereft of intelligence or consciousness, its character fundamentally alien to that of man.”<sup>9</sup>

Against this externally rigid and mechanical, not to mention universally objectively standardized, world-view of the Enlightenment, along with the classical culture spawned by it, the Romantic movement passionately revolted. All that the Enlightenment had stood for in its deification of the intellect, its utilitarian prejudices, and its faith in technological efficiency, as well as its optimistic belief in progress was to be rejected. In place of its emphasis on the idea of a universal truth and the primacy of the intellect as the highest goal of human endeavor, Romanticism substituted the *emotions*, insisting on the priority of experience over thought. Reality was not something to be discovered in the reason but was to be conjured up “through feeling, sentiment, imagination, instinct, passion, dream and recollection.”<sup>10</sup> What is more, it arises in the consciousness of man in a purely spontaneous and unprescribed manner and is not the result of abstract reflection on some pre-determined order of truth. When it came to nature, whereas science saw it merely as an object to be studied, experimented upon, explained and technically controlled, the Romantics viewed it as an animating force,

8. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 292.

9. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, pp. 326, 327.

10. J. L. Talmon, *Romanticism and Revolt: Europe 1815–1848*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1979), p. 139.

full of mystery and spiritual meaning, to be approached with ecstatic wonder.

This Romantic view of nature is the flip-side of its view of freedom. Not being content to oppose the *geometrical spirit*, along with the *empiricism*, of Enlightenment science, Romantics viewed nature as more than a mere mechanism: it was life, power and mystery. The analogy of the machine was replaced by that of a biological organism. "In contrast with the spirit of the Enlightenment," observes Tarnas, "the Romantic vision perceived the world as a unitary organism rather than an atomistic machine, exalted the ineffability of inspiration rather than the enlightenment of reason, and affirmed the inexhaustible drama of human life rather than the calm predictability of static abstractions."<sup>11</sup> Romantics were inclined to describe "nature as *naturans*, that is, animated by a living principle, as opposed to *natura naturata*, that is, finished and dead product."<sup>12</sup> Nature, in this view, was combined with *God*, or at least with *Spirit*, and was seen as a life-force, a source of creativity in and through man. Nature does not so much *exist* as *becomes*, evolving into new and higher forms. This evolutionary thesis was to have strong repercussions in the nineteenth century when, through the influence of Lamarck, Lyell and, especially, Darwin, it penetrated to the core of scientific thought itself.

The so-called "quest for 'nature'" in Romantic ideology was the search not for certainty or law but for whatever elicited awe and feeling. They looked upon nature not as a habitation from which man conjures inventions, fabricated and artificial products to increase his comfort and happiness, but as a transcending totality in which all manner of experiences offer themselves to the quest for authenticity and freedom. Nature was implored not for its order and normality but for its uncommon features, its rugged, uncultivated and inscrutable phenomena which are to Romantics the well-springs of meaning and life. Unless this be understood we cannot rightly grasp, for example,

11. Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, p. 367.

12. Baumer, *Modern European Thought*, p. 281.

what lies at the root of the modern environmental, “back-to-nature,” movement. Man, in Romantic belief, cannot achieve freedom and true humanity, unless he replaces all scientific and rationalist approaches to nature with a view of it as a fount of spiritual regeneration.

The opposition of Romanticism to the Enlightenment’s worship of science and the reason is easily understood. Reducing reality to a quantitative datum of purely mechanical movement in time and space according to an inviolable natural law amounted to the loss of a complex and varied human experience. Man was said to have forsaken a sense of integration with his world, with life in general which seemed to shrivel against the vast, impersonal machine of the universe. Man’s purpose, though he was eulogized by the Enlightenment as the great thinker of the thoughts of the cosmos, had become that of a mere cog in the machine. The promise of the Renaissance had been to realize a divine status for man; the Enlightenment had shown that the new mathematically prescribed order of reality, in the end, rendered that hope null and void. Seeing the dilemma in which things now stood, the Romantic movement sought to recover the divinity of man in an altogether different direction, one that, for the most part, could not be found in the intellect but in the depths of the emotions and senses. Deeply deploring the formalization and objectivization of life as it was alleged to have become under the influence of modern science, they called, instead, for a new freedom against all order and purpose that do not arise entirely from man’s experience and will. Theirs became the voice of the counter-culture with its vehement rebellion from all culture and civilization which seeks in any way to delimit man’s actions or impose an external order on his psyche and morality. We should not be surprised if “[t]he revolt against the standardization of life easily becomes a revolt against the whole conception of standards.”<sup>13</sup> And in the West, we should not hesitate to mention, the most imposing of all standards had been that of Christianity. Behind the apparent revolt against *scientism*

13. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 312.

the Romantic movement was a reaction against the Christian heritage with its belief in man as God's creature living in God's world bound by His order, and also in man's sin and God's requirement of a salvation through submission of man's will to God's. Romantics would accept no order but their own and submit to no one but themselves. In order to safeguard this intent, however, Romantics needed to make a god of experience *per se*.

## 2> *Proto-Romantics*

Although Romanticism is often treated as a movement in the modern period that was antagonistic to the mind-set of the Enlightenment, in fact, much of what is representative in its character had antecedents in the past, especially the medieval past. In this respect, Romanticism had an affinity with certain features of Christianity although it rejected the latter's essential content. However, what Romantics found attractive in the Christian medieval past derived primarily from what was by and large a corruption of the Christian faith and life, namely, its asceticism and mysticism, features which do not constitute the core principles of Biblical teaching but were borrowed from pagan sources. Nevertheless, because there were significant parallels between Romantics and medieval ascetics, and because Romantics were self-conscious in their wish to revive the values of that earlier mystical outlook, it would be worthwhile to glance back and see exactly what that legacy entailed as well as what effect it came to have on modern Romantic thought.

Western *Christian* mysticism was a product of the monastic world and its search for *spiritual* release. As we mentioned, Christianity was early affected by the in-roads of Gnostic dualistic thinking in which a heavy emphasis was placed upon the antithesis of matter and spirit, body and soul. The Christian doctrine of salvation from sin by many became quickly transformed into the belief that this meant a deliverance from all materiality and earthly existence. To achieve this goal a strict regime of abstention from all interests of the body and society was imposed

on its adherents as the essence of the Christian life and conduct. At the same time, as a corollary of this practice, its devotees were led into the realms of mysticism. Abstention from this world was only a part of the program; the other part was to experience, while burdened here on earth with time and matter, a mystical union (*unio mystica*) with heaven and God, thereby to undergo a foretaste of rapturous blessedness. In time, it became a part of official church doctrine to speak of something called the *beatific vision*, a sort of brief, but intense, glimpse into a perfect seeing and experiencing of God in His immediate and unhidden divinity. It was taught as something that was only possible for certain, privileged individuals who had dedicated their lives to a total ascetic withdrawal and absorption in a complete knowing of God. It might, or might not, happen to some great saint. This vision was a uniquely mystical experience which could not be explained or described in this life, but which marked its recipient as one highly favored for his or her devotion to nothing but the love of and desire for God. An overwhelming experience, then, of something that was beyond the confines of the ordinary and mundane left an indelible imprint on Western culture through Christian mysticism and would return again to inspire Romantic aspirations, only then it would be seen not so much as a vision of God as of the self as god.

Although mystical asceticism had been a part of the so-called Christian faith for centuries, it became especially pronounced in the High Middle Ages. And while the church had accorded it a legitimate place in its official teaching, yet by the mid-twelfth century it was to proliferate not only on the fringes of church control but, more precisely, as a serious protest movement against all forms of established authority, regardless whether it was Scriptural, Ecclesiastical or Philosophical (i.e., Scholasticism).<sup>14</sup> All types of external authority were deeply resented and opposed. As a result, a new non-church sanctioned

14. Andrew Weeks, *German Mysticism: From Hildegard of Bingen to Ludwig Wittgenstein*, (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 12.



mysticism became widespread, although in the main it was usually attached to one of the many so-called heretical movements. Perhaps the most formidable of these was something called the heresy of the Free Spirit.

Free Spirit mysticism, it is said, sprang "from a craving for immediate apprehension of and communion with God."<sup>15</sup> Its adherents exhibited a passion for ecstatic experiences which, as it resulted from an immediate encounter with the divine, soon encouraged the belief that no authority existed for them outside their own experiences. Accordingly, they regarded the church with its forms and functions to be, not merely an obstacle, but an enemy of true religious salvation. We should not be surprised if their program was productive of a certain self-conceit. As Cohn remarked; "The core of the heresy of the Free Spirit lay in the adept's attitude towards himself: he believed that he had attained a perfection so absolute that he was incapable of sin."<sup>16</sup> So certain were they, in fact, of having achieved such a state that they no longer considered it necessary that their conduct should be regulated by any moral norms, instead they were free to pursue every activity with utter abandon. In other words, they were free to do whatever had been thought of as forbidden. Moreover, not to act with a complete indifference or even contempt of moral requirements was to be enslaved to them, hence, neither free nor perfect. Rather than feeling the need to restrain the impulses of the flesh, they were at liberty to indulge in a total carefree sensuality which to them "possessed above all a symbolic value as a sign of spiritual emancipation...."<sup>17</sup> That soul which has been thus absorbed into God was free to act as if his actions were of no account. If one participates in God, so they reasoned, then he, too, like God, exists above all laws. As God is free to do whatever He pleases, then so are those who have become completely one with Him. Nothing was taken over by the Romantic mind quite as thoroughly as this self-proclaimed liberation from

15. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 150.

16. Cohn, p. 150.

17. Cohn, p. 151.

all moral constraint.

Among the many factors contributing to this so-called “crisis of authority” was one having to do with the growing “humanization of the image of God,” whose greatest proponent at this time was perhaps none other than Bernard of Clairvaux. It began when Bernard shifted the emphasis in Christian thinking about Christ and redemption away from the *Christus Victor* theme, so prominent in the early Middle Ages, to that of “the man of sorrows.” Not Christ in his triumph over death and his enemies, but Christ in his humble human form as the suffering servant became more powerfully stressed. It was meant to elicit a greater awareness of and sympathy for the human side of Christ’s nature and thereby to arouse a keener appreciation of the close union between man and God in general. Its effect was to narrow the “perceived distance between the divine and human” and to generate a desire for a deeper experience of God than mere intellect could provide.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, it played heavily upon the emotions, a fact of considerable importance to the masses who perceived only a ritual sterility in the ordered cultus of the official church. Not surprisingly, it drew many in the direction of the heresy movements who promised to satisfy their needs in this respect.

One of the important outcomes of this humanization of the divine was to be seen in a rebellion by some against the Biblical-Augustinian teaching on the distinction between the Creator and creature. It apparently came to expression from the longing “to bridge the chasm between the eternal world in God and the created world in time.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the idea of creation *ex nihilo* came under severe attack: it implied too sharp a difference between God and the world. One wanted to see creation as a process, not as a finished product, the world as a development, with the temporal and the eternal representing alternating poles of one single and indivisible reality. God and the soul was another pole of reality to be seen as gradually coalescing into one

18. Andrew Weeks, *German Mysticism*, p. 40.

19. Weeks, p. 30.

another.

In the early fourteenth century this doctrine of the Free Spirit was presented as an intricate philosophical and theological system. The framework of its conception was Neoplatonic, especially as the latter tended to foster a pantheistic outlook. To see and experience everything as an aspect of God was the chief feature. The idea of having emanated from God and of the longing to reunite with (be re-absorbed into) God was particularly emphasized. The desire to escape creaturehood had long been an ambition of man, as we mentioned. Real life and power were held to lie in becoming divine and of inhabiting the realm of eternity. However, the Free Spirit zealots were not ones to grant such recognition of divinity to any but their own number. Furthermore, it was no onetime experience, such as was taught by the church's official doctrine of the *unio mystica*, but a permanent and everlasting condition.

The foremost proselytizer of this way of thinking was Meister Eckhart (c.1260–1329) who, after Abelard, was perhaps the greatest mind to be condemned as a heretic in the Middle Ages. Eckhart, in 1302, in his early forties, had achieved what was regarded by those in medieval academic circles to be the pinnacle of success: he was appointed professor of theology at the most prestigious university of the time, the University of Paris. Like Thomas Aquinas before him, he, too, belonged to the Order of Preachers, the Dominicans, and was famous in his day as an outstanding sermonizer. It was actually more from his prolific preaching than from his academic lectures that he came to the notice of the ecclesiastical authorities. They would soon denounce his ideas as unorthodox, and with good reason.

It is not an easy matter to understand the thinking of Eckhart, for although he used the language of orthodoxy, he nevertheless imported a foreign content strongly influenced by Greek philosophical ideas. One thing seems clear: he was a man who possessed a deep-seated distrust of what we might call the literal sense of Scripture. As far as he was concerned, its language was merely a gateway to profounder, hidden meanings. Being thus influenced by especially Neoplatonic assumptions, he willingly

read their meaning into the text of Scripture.

Scholastic thought had taken the view that man and God together participated in a common Being and that each therefore possessed their own static share of a common reality. According to its program, everything turned upon an intellectual grasp of that reality. In the Scholastic mind, Being came before knowing and the latter activity must conform to the former. The issue of truth, in this view, was made to depend upon the correct logical connection, for the order of Being predisposed the order of knowing. In the end, all that was thought knowable became more and more abstract and static. To know God in such a manner, Eckhart felt, left the stirrings of man's heart devoid of any deeper communion with God. Against this program of learning Eckhart lodged a protest, as Romantics would later do against the Enlightenment which had reduced everything to its mathematical proportions.

By way of contrast, Eckhart reversed the relationship between Being and knowing, especially as it concerned God's being. In this way, what God *knows* is the same as what he *is*. And what He knows is the world! Thus, God is not external to the world, but in knowing it, He creates it and it, in turn, becomes an expression of Himself. Because knowing is an eternal act, so too, creating is an eternal act, not a mere onetime event. In this way, so Eckhart thought, God becomes the idea of all things, their inner essence.<sup>20</sup> The two poles of reality – God and world – are more intimately fused and conform to a dynamic pattern rather than a static relationship of a strict logical association.

On the other hand, Eckhart spoke of creatures, man in particular, as existing "in tension between nothingness and infinite divinity."<sup>21</sup> Somewhere in between is *slavery* (affinity with nothingness) and *freedom* (affinity with divinity). Man, caught in the middle, lives in the complete possibility of moving in either one direction or the other. It is Eckhart's supreme purpose to

20. Frank Tobin, *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), p. 57.

21. Tobin, p. 64.

urge men to seek freedom by means of achievement of equality with divinity which he believes it is in all men's power so to do.<sup>22</sup> This is made possible by what he described as the "birth of the Son" in the soul, an act of self-accomplishment on the order of the incarnation which for Eckhart was a symbol of what can be realized in all seekers after the divine. Furthermore, this operation occurs, not as an action of God's will, but by reason "of activity arising necessarily out of the infinite dynamism and perfection of God" of which man is an active participant.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, it is an action by which God necessarily becomes man and, on the other, by which man necessarily becomes God. God and the soul merge together in a mystical embrace, thereby enabling man to rise from *nothingness* to the *being* which is God. The so-called Christian message becomes one of metaphysical transformation, not ethical renewal, a mysterious overcoming of creaturehood. Romantics were greatly impressed with this sort of thinking, albeit without the medieval *Christian* overtones.

Of even greater influence on Romantic thinking was Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), a man who became the voice of a radical pietistic Christianity in the period of the late Reformation. Not much is known of Boehme's early life. We know that he grew up in an area of Germany called Silesia, a territory permeated with Anabaptist and Free Spirit activism. The heavy emphasis that was placed upon the need for a totally transforming spiritual experience by this sect left a deep impression on the multitude of peasants and small shopkeepers of the region from among whom Boehme was to rise to prominence. In 1600, Boehme alleges to have had a divine visitation which compelled him to leave off his work (shoe-cobbler) and to go out to contemplate nature and therein to discover its divine indications (*signatures*). Boehme claimed that his spiritual *rebirth* had given him an illumination of nature's secrets that were not accessible to scientists or discoverable by any known rational means.

A peculiar feature of Boehme's thinking was his belief that

22. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 94.

23. Tobin, p. 101.

the entire cosmos expresses but a single divine process at work. No distinction exists between creation and redemption. They are one and the same and constitute an on-going operation. Furthermore, the world-process represents a gradual unfolding of the divine within it. This activity of God in *creating/saving* the world is an action of self-recognition and self-realization on His part. The eternal is seen in the temporal as light in darkness. However, it cannot be seen by any but the true believer who has undergone the miracle of *rebirth*. To believe meant that one was translated from a world of ordinary concerns into a higher eternal world of a fathomless mystical beauty.<sup>24</sup>

Boehme seems to have been profoundly influenced by the Renaissance hermetic belief that man could acquire a knowledge (*gnosis*) of God which entailed a deeper apprehension of His necessary way with the world which thereby enabled man to become privy to the secrets of the movement of time and history, giving him the key to the why and wherefore of all things. What is more, he who acquired such knowledge stood at the center and gazed out upon the world not only with greater understanding but with a greater power to "play a more active and deliberate role in bringing about the divine perfection of all things."<sup>25</sup> The whole vision of God in Boehme's conception was what it meant for mankind's salvation in history. Salvation becomes a radically immanent fulfillment in which man arrives at the final state of perfection in time. Whereas Eckhart still thought in terms of translation from the temporal into the eternal, Boehme thought more in terms of the eternal becoming fully manifest in the temporal. While both ideals were paramount for Romantic revisers of this medieval *Christian* mysticism, it was in fact Boehme's ideal of "innerworldly fulfillment" that achieved greater prominence in Romantic thought, especially in its conception of the movement of history as a process of self-salvation towards a state of paradise within time. We may mention here, in passing, its

24. Tobin, *Meister Eckhart*, pp. 179, 182.

25. David Walsh, *The Mysticism of Innerworldly Fulfillment: A Study of Jacob Boehme*, (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1983), pp. 12, 13.

particular influence on Hegelian and Marxian thinking in the nineteenth century.

Boehme was undoubtedly the most important source of Romanticism's nature mysticism. They clearly drew from him the idea that nature is a living witness, a realm of meaning that went far beyond the intelligence of the observer or scientist. It possessed secrets hidden beneath the outer appearance. The world cannot be truly known apart from a deeper intuitive grasp (experience) of its mystery. It is a riddle demanding an interpretation of its *signatures* from those who have entered into a profound sympathy with its obvious enigma. At the same time, they also took from him a secularized vision of man as possessing a total knowledge of the movement of time in the direction of a state of perfection. Man is not just a viewer, however, but is co-united with God/Nature in His/Its seeking of its own self-manifestation in immanent reality. Being a spark of the divine spirit (nature) unfolding himself within time, the consequences were that man should realize a state of finality within the framework of temporal, earthly reality. "At the heart of this conception of innerworldly reality as the agonistic process of God's self-revelation is a crucial presupposition that has become equally central to the whole of modern thought: the notion that the will is prior to being."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the world is what man makes of it: he wills it into existence. Romanticism reaches its conclusion with Nietzsche's "will to power," in which man is said to live "beyond good and evil."

We should, perhaps, mention one last figure from the medieval past who has also been a source of inspiration for Romantic and pietistic idealism: Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). Not the least of her importance has to do with the fact that she was a woman, and modern Romantics and counter-culture types in general have seen in her a symbol of the liberation of women as a peculiar feature of liberation in general. She achieved a remarkable status in a man's world and has continued to serve as a role model for the Romantically inspired freedom of

26. Walsh, *The Mysticism of Innerworldly Fulfillment*, p. 16.

women from especially male oppression throughout modern times.

Hildegard was deeply influenced by the spread of Free Spirit thinking which promoted the idea that one could have direct revelations from God in the form of voice or visions. Those who had experienced such ecstatic communions, as Hildegard alleges to have had, also claimed to have an authority from God that excelled all traditional sources of authority, whether ecclesiastical or lay. Theirs being a more immediate access to divine truth they were not hesitant to demand that the established authorities should submit to their words. Hildegard achieved renown for her boldness in corresponding with powerful rulers, often chastising or rebuking them in the name of a divine authority granted to her direct from God. This belief in the mystics' superiority over long recognized earthly powers was a chief factor in their influence on later Romantic writers and thinkers. They, too, came to believe that they possessed an insight into the truth of all things which far exceeded ordinary souls whose lives were shaped by mere mundane and present concerns. Romantics were not content to have had experiences that transcended that of others, theirs was an elitist attitude which demanded that their insights and interpretations be the only acceptable ones. This outlook was reinforced by another that mystics like Hildegard also promoted.

Hildegard, as did all Free Spirit adepts, distrusted any forms of mediation between the individual soul and God. Instead, she sought to encourage the idea that the only contact between God and the soul was that of *love*, a deep, emotional attachment that derived not at all from any considerations of either vice or virtue. Love of God was not a love of the ways of God as that of Truth and Righteousness, but was solely a personal experience that excluded all thought of duty or responsibility. It bred the notion of a *noble soul* filled with undiluted and non-calculating personal devotion to the One who has filled it so utterly with warmth and tender affection. Such a direct access to God stood not at all in need of any means, whether from Church or Scripture, to instruct or guide the devotee in such matters.



The so-called external aspects of the faith were increasingly deemed useless, even harmful to a true *heart* religion.

Romantics, of course, did not believe in God, but they did believe in nature, and sought to emphasize the same approach to it as earlier mystics had done with respect to God. One enters into a profound love for and communion with nature wherein one achieves a state of inner nobility that allows one to act in the external realm with little regard for forms or rules. Romantics were great flaunters of established mores and patterns of social and ethical behavior. In particular, they felt free to explore all avenues of sensual and emotional stimulation simply because *to experience* was the greatest good for man. And since they were moved by a total and uninhibited *love*, and not from necessity or any imposing requirements, their actions were without any sense of sin or wrong-doing. As Cohn once more comments: "What distinguished the adepts of the Free Spirit from all other medieval sectarians was, precisely, their total amorality. For them the proof of salvation was to know nothing of conscience or remorse."<sup>27</sup> In a like manner, and for similar reasons, Romantics believed that they had arrived at a level wherein sin was abolished and, hence, one was free to do whatever one pleased. For them to practice *free love* was to affirm one's emancipation from all conditions of moral dependence, as well as from guilt or the fear of punishment.

### 3> *The Romantic Agenda*

Because it is a central truth of Romanticism that man is culturally repressed and must be delivered from such an execrable state of affairs, Romantics therefore meant to show him how he could do so. They would not be content simply to describe man's pitiful plight, they must offer him a way of salvation. Man cannot be truly himself unless he achieves a total freedom from all external and traditional institutions and authorities, from all

27. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 177.

dogmas of truth and knowledge, ethics and religion. However, the goal of Romanticism is not merely one of annihilating all culture in general; indeed, they wish to furnish a program or agenda of their own, one that gives full satisfaction to the urge of man to be free, and yet, presumably, achieves a complete order which man might be willing to submit to as a standard of life, thought, and behavior. Culture must be re-made as Romantic culture, man must be re-made as Romantic man.

It will undoubtedly be a difficult task. Man's self-proclaimed ideal of freedom from all but his own will and imagination does not easily fit with an idea of culture. For culture – any culture – inevitably demands sacrifice and self-denial on the part of those who seek to advance it if it is to achieve any permanence or durability. There must be a greater good for which every individual is willing to give up some of his own if he wishes to see it realized. Culture implies a willingness on the part of those who seek it to forego immediate benefits for longer term ones. Culture is not something that one may take for granted as if it will form and grow without deliberate and thoughtful effort. To have and enjoy the benefits of culture demands that we set priorities, adhere to and promote mutually recognized values, understand the importance of shared goals and the means to achieve them and, finally, that we be willing to relinquish purely personal gratification in the interest of greater social and moral stability – in short, to seek my neighbors good as well as my own. All these requirements, however, are completely at odds with the goals of personal freedom and self-fulfillment as represented by the agenda of Romanticism. To seek freedom must surely mean to deny any obligations other than the singular one of freedom! Yet, Romanticism in the modern age has stood for the belief that freedom *is* culture, that the attainment of the one quite simply means the accomplishment of the other. It requires a faith of no paltry proportions to disregard this contradiction. And if this were not enough, we might reflect on what modern history has recorded of the many attempts to create cultural order from the pursuit of freedom as proclaimed by Romanticism.

The Romantic agenda is not a simple program; it does not

offer a mere method or a precisely defined set of principles to instruct its disciples in the correct course of action. At least this was true in its initial phases. Once Romantics became politically inspired, however, they would be provided with a carefully constructed formula for success: the seizure of the state and the forcible and radical transmutation of all aspects of life into socialist order. This would become visible in history when the revolt from cultural oppression became associated with the need to rebel against all perceived political oppression. But, at the outset, Romanticism followed a more individualistic pathway and sought merely to retreat from all externally imposed forms of human society in general. They began with the view that they should opt out from any concern but that of the soul alone.

The Enlightenment's passion for mathematical exactness and standardized uniformity was perhaps nowhere more apparent than in its vision of society. A feature of its belief in this respect was its acceptance of the Stoical idea that life should be lived in accordance with virtue and not with pleasure. Thus, "[t]he aim of a good life is not pleasure but control, conformity to cosmic law, resignation to the will of the gods, duty, and self-abnegation that scorns riches and sinks itself into some larger civic good."<sup>28</sup> One should strive to achieve an inward composure that harmonized with things as they are and to avoid those emotional impulses which sought satisfaction in the fleeting and unstable senses. It is the purpose of the wise man to possess tranquillity in the face of all stresses and discomforts and to subordinate oneself to the universal law of nature and reason. He looks to duty more than self-interest; he accepts self-restraint, self-discipline and perfect calm in all circumstances. He seeks, then, the civic good over all private and personal good. In this respect, he sees as the proper motivation for actions and beliefs the promotion of something called *the universal rights of man*. Enlightenment social thought was centered on the need to create conditions of political equality and to transform men into

28. Howard Mumford Jones, *Revolution and Romanticism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 135.

responsible citizens. This could be achieved by finding the correct legal forms and subordinating all selfish desires to the rule of abstract law. In Enlightenment social thought man lives for the goal of the good society and not merely for the good life of the individual, for without social order no good in any sense would be possible.

Romantics, however, could not be satisfied with this program. To them it meant the subordination of real human beings to an artificial and external collectivity. It insisted that man the individual suppress his natural inclinations and predilections for the sake of intellectual abstractions and impersonal constructs. Instead of man shaping his own life in accordance with the peculiarities of his own individual nature, he was forced to submit himself to an agenda that was prescribed for him and which remained purely outside his intrinsic pursuits. Consequently, "romantic individualism was not satisfied with the merely civic interpretation of man."<sup>29</sup> For it, a program of purely *political equality* meant nothing more than a stifling conformity. Simply to be a *citizen* was to lose sight of the special characteristics, even eccentricities, of each unique individual personality. Political liberalism merely produced the unknown and faceless member of society. As far as Romantics were concerned "it was less important that a human being be a citizen than that he be a soul."<sup>30</sup> The qualities that make man a man and endow him with genuine purpose were simply smothered in the crowd. It was not *rights* that mattered but the achievement of authentic selfhood. Thus, a social order governed merely by law was beneath their contempt. The true individual was superior to such trivial matters as social forms and conventions. If necessary, he must realize his potential at the expense of legalities and customs.

Initially, then, Romantics sought the goal of the Romantic vision outside of the realm of the political. They turned to the arts and the artistic imagination. It was there that Romantics became inspired by something called the *creative genius*. In this

29. Jones, *Revolution and Romanticism*, p. 231.

30. Jones, p. 232.

respect, Romanticism was not advocated as a movement for the masses, but as a program for the unique individual who stood apart from the ordinary and who created a world based upon a deeper revelatory insight into the emotions and feelings. Two areas especially were to be seized upon to give expression to this ideal: music and literature.

Believing as they did that art and artistic genius were the true motive forces of creative energy, Romantics were especially apt to see in music, because it stimulates so profusely the non-intellectual dimensions of the psychic emotions, the purest source of the soul's liberation. As Talmon commented: "The incomparable power of suggestion possessed by music, its ability to work on the mind directly without the mediation of words, and yet to convey an infinite range of impressions, feelings and thoughts, made it the ideal art of Romanticism."<sup>31</sup> The Romantics' preference for music was very much the product of their belief that reality is shrouded in mystery and that meaning lies below the threshold of conscious intellectual processes. Music conveyed the impression that the depths of experience could not be adequately reflected upon, let alone articulated or objectively analyzed. If anything, music stirred the soul's own vitality without the need to consider whether or not it conformed to some external order. The purpose was to arouse in the soul – the inner self – its own internal forces and passions whose legitimacy was not dependent upon whether or not they were felt or expressed in accordance with some objective or necessary truth. It was enough that music produced the stimulus needed by the soul to project itself and create a reality in conformity with its own experience.

Music has always been a tool in culture formation. In the ancient world music was connected to the life of the community whose realities were shaped by legends of great ancestors who performed deeds of heroic accomplishment and by the gods against whom men were to compare themselves in their desire to live the best life possible. In the time of Homer, the poet who

31. Talmon, *Romanticism and Revolt*, p. 147.

recounted these stories was at the same time a bard who conveyed his message in song. Music gives to the story-teller a powerful means to elicit from his audience an emotional sense of attachment to the myths that were alleged to inspire their own actions and interests. Also, in the Middle Ages, the Christian message of withdrawal from the world was reinforced by means of music that led one into the interiorities of the soul where one could more easily focus one's attention on the *spiritual* realm with its attendant mysteries. The monastic world was filled with the music of the chant which solemnized the devotion of the soul in deeper ways than words alone could possibly express. Music has long been used as an inducement to the ideals for which men have sought to live and for the world they have yearned to realize. In this respect, Romanticism was no exception.

The purpose of music was to kindle the energies of the spirit, to transport the soul from the tedium of the ordinary to the heights of wonder and imagination, to awaken in consciousness the dark and hidden forces of the unconscious core of one's being wherein lie the creative powers of man. Music was a means to excite as well as the very product of the artistic genius. In the Romantic world, the artist was a man above men, a veritable messiah-type. Romantics saw in the artist the light of the world, the salt of the earth, the image of divinity, the reveler of the secrets of God, the interpreter of nature, prophet, priest, and king. All the symbols of the religious past, as re-worked in the Romantic mind, coalesced in the soul of the artistic genius. Genius cannot be produced by culture or civilization, it is neither taught nor learned, it supersedes all known methods of achievement. "Genius flashes, genius creates, genius does not contrive anything, because it *is*. It is something not manageable. Its character is revelation, not reason.... Genius is super-nature, super-art, super-learning, super-talent."<sup>32</sup> Like their Free Spirit forebears, Romantics placed the genius above all conventions and authorities: he communed directly with God, or, in the case of

32. Jones, *Revolution and Romanticism*, p. 284.

the Romantics, with nature. The genius is not measured by some external truth, but is a truth unto himself.

As in music, so also in literature, the Romantics exalted the power of the imagination. In their minds, reality was not uniform and static, but alive and undergoing perpetual transformation. To speak as if one could know with certainty the truth of all that pertained to the real world in which man lived was pure fantasy. There is no one meaning or truth to be discovered, but only endless variety, with each new moment revealing something altogether unique. The goal of man should not be to get hold of some final and permanent knowledge of a given reality, but to pursue the endlessly novel in experience. Man's relationship to his world should not be one of understanding, but of encountering the vast range of heretofore unfamiliarities of the senses and feelings. Tarnas has clarified the matter thus:

To explore the mysteries of interiority, of moods and motives, love and desire, fear and angst, inner conflicts and contradictions, memories and dreams, to experience extreme and incommunicable states of consciousness, to be inwardly grasped in epiphanic ecstasy, to plumb the depths of the human soul, to bring the unconscious into consciousness, to know the infinite – such were the imperatives of Romantic introspection.<sup>33</sup>

In short, it is not the world outside that is the principal concern to the Romantic temperament, but the one inside. There alone can be found the materials for making a world conducive to human habitation.

When the Romantic turned to this inner world what he saw was a state of radical indetermination. Everything was in flux. However, he also believed that he could bring order out of this indefiniteness. He would create in literature the archetypal hero, the man (or woman) who shapes his world by an act of self-will. In the melodrama of the novel the Romantic would project himself in the persona of the main character who disdains

33. Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, p. 368.

to submit to the conventions of society and, instead, behaves in accordance with his own chosen values which are dictated solely by his desires and longings. Simply put, “[h]e had to will into existence a fictive drama into which he could enter and live, imposing a redemptive order on the chaos of a meaningless universe without God.”<sup>34</sup>

Dramatic fiction in the modern era became the principal means by which Romanticism endeavored to promote its ideals. However, the principal actor in this imaginative drama was more the *anti*-hero than hero as his actions were less in terms of obeying than in challenging the social mores that Romantics saw as so stifling in their own world. His purpose was not to accept, but to smash through the confines of the mundane and ordinary, boldly defying society’s standards of conduct and credence. In this, he acts the part of the tragic hero who dares to oppose what to the ignorant masses appears to be the settled order of nature. As he cannot conform, so he must be destroyed. But therein he exposes his role as the martyr-hero who shows the way to a higher, nobler calling. His martyrdom makes atonement for all the ills of this life and opens the world of the commonplace to the possibility of a better and divine experience. Romantics would not accept the world in fact: they preferred a world in narrative fable. In terms of truth, the real was the fictional and the fictional was the real. It is a legacy still pursued by vast numbers of our own day.

The rebel-hero of Romantic literature, while presented in an idealized form, was in fact the Romantic’s way of proclaiming his own deep dissatisfaction with the prevailing conditions of mankind. The Romantic liked to identify himself with the toiling, suffering masses. It reinforced his own belief that man was a victim of great forces outside him which conspired to overwhelm and crush him with a merciless indifference. The rise of modern industrial society, with its replacement of personal bonds with purely contractual relationships of an impersonal, calculating nature, filled Romantics with a revulsion of hatred and stoked

34. Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, pp. 370-371.



the flames of a powerful revolutionary agenda. Cultural repression was soon seen quintessentially as political oppression, of the poor by the rich, the weak by the strong. Society was rent by the fierce antagonisms between exploiter and exploited, between the owner of the means of production and the worker who owned nothing but his labor which he could sell for mere slave's wages.

Romantics quickly became fired by what to them seemed to be grave injustices. No longer would they simply distance themselves from society's concerns; instead, they became animated by a vision for a radical new social utopia. They saw the need to destroy all existing social order and to reconstruct society in accordance with a program that would free mankind from every form of exploitation. The principal means to accomplish this goal would be to apprehend by violence the control of the state and through it to transform all existing relationships into a totally socialist system. All property would be seized by the state and the state would remit to every man the things he has need of for life and happiness. In this way, every man would cease to live and act in pursuit of his own private interests and, instead, would be made to submit to the higher good of the state. In this latter respect, the Romantic view differs little from the Enlightenment view which also sought, by means of Stoic universalism, to transform the actions and pursuits of individuals to fit with its vision of civic and social good. It is simply that in the Enlightenment view this would be accomplished by means of education and science, whereas the Romantics thought less in terms of the use of reason as the means and more in terms of the use of compulsion and force.

In the nineteenth century it was Marxism that first captured the imagination of the discontented with anything like a serious possibility for achieving these ends, but other, less overtly radical, systems of thought were no less attractive. And despite the failure of Marxism, or other socialist programs, to achieve their stated goals completely, nevertheless a major change in opinion concerning the centrality of the role of the state has become deeply embedded in the thinking of most people in the modern world. Wherever the activist state exists, regardless of its

degree of domination over all areas of contemporary social life, there the Romantic spirit is still to be found alive and instrumentally at work.

At this juncture we may wonder, what is the present status of Romanticism? Do we sense a change in the wind? Are people beginning to reject the influence of Romanticism in their cultural ideals? Is it not apparent, at least politically, that vast numbers are coming to regard the state not so much as a means of social utopia but as a wrenching tyranny? Has socialism, in all its forms, not been discredited? Is there not everywhere a struggle going on to rid ourselves of the intrusive presence of government with its powerful bureaucratic and regulatory strangulation of our lives and labors? Has statism really produced the *freedom* and happiness that was promised on its behalf?

It is, perhaps, true that for increasingly greater numbers of people on the planet the hope of salvation by the state has greatly waned. The eighty years in which half the world lived under the Marxist inspired communist systems, if anything, has exposed its Romantic assumptions for the myths that they are. But does that mean people have begun to see an alternative to the central role of the state? In the West especially, which has been our chief concern throughout this study, one is reluctant to concede that Romantic ideals have disappeared. A very large segment of society still puts great faith in the state. Certainly intellectuals and thinkers have not abandoned that hope. How does one explain this? The chief reason for this would seem to lie in the fact that the other side of Romanticism, the side which emphasized the complete freedom of the individual to indulge in all sorts of experiences, to stimulate his senses and feelings with little or no regard for anyone or anything but his own wishes and desires, has continued to control the center of Western man's ideal of culture and civilization. Whether we think of drugs, popular music, or sexual experimentation, everywhere we can see frantic multitudes urgently pursuing self-fulfilling gratifications. And the elites insist that it is every person's right to enjoy whatever libertinism any person may fancy. At the same time, many pander to the notion that come what may it is the state's respon-

sibility to pick up the tab. Thus, unless and until Romanticism is obliterated in its entirety, Western culture will remain mired in its present situation.

However, another perspective on this matter is equally appropriate. Romanticism, let us recall, began as a distant voice of protest, first spoken by literary and philosophical thinkers and writers against a world that seemed to them oppressive and alienating. It has grown, in the space of three centuries, to include the masses and to offer them a moral directive for personal and social order. Romanticism thrives on the notion that the world has no meaning and that life is devoid of intrinsic value or purpose. Things such as truth, justice, right, wrong, or good and evil, have no absolute meaning, but are only subjective and, at best, relative to social convention. Still, man must have order to live, especially to live in society. Life would otherwise be impossible given the harsh reality of man's natural environment, and the long-recognized propensity of man to plunder and destroy his fellow man. Thus, despite the longing for freedom and autonomy, and the belief that all men are driven by the same impulse, the romantic spirit is thoroughly contemptuous of any who think that men should simply be left to pursue life on their own terms and for their own ends. Rousseau, who especially exalted the life of primitive over civilized men, who believed that men were more in harmony with nature and with one another before they were seized with the itch to accumulate material wealth and social status, nevertheless, knew that mankind neither would nor could return to his original state of innocence voluntarily. Consequently, he believed that man must necessarily, and for his own deepest good, be compelled by force to be free. In other words, the good society, a society in which man regained his lost original unity, could only be made possible by a deliberate political act. All individual wills, he maintained, must be coerced into submitting to "the general will." It was only when men had been corrupted by each man's desire to act and live according to his own private will that they became tempted by selfish ambition and personal gain at the expense of equality and unity. And since no overarching moral order exists to govern the life of men in

their relationships to other men, the only solution is to create order by political power. At the same time, the elite thinkers, motivated by Romantic ideals, were under no illusion about who should be the orderers and who should be the ordered, who should do the coercing and who should be coerced. They alone belonged in the first group, all others in the second. In this respect, Romanticism still shares the Enlightenment faith in superior knowledge as the means to govern and arrange men and things. Western governments have come increasingly to rely on this notion to give legitimation to their policies and practices. If the general societies of Western man seem little inclined to object, it is only because they have sacrificed any idea of moral order as Divine order and, instead, have accepted the alternative of man's order as all that is available for personal and social behavior.

With Romanticism, Western civilization has arrived at the present stage of the impulse to power. And, yet, it is a vision of man and society still deeply indebted to the Greek, especially Platonic, goal of an elitist control of man by certain specially endowed persons whose idea of the Good provides the only acceptable standard of truth, justice and order. In other words, the contest between the Humanist and the Christian dimension of Western civilization appears to have concluded with the ascendancy of the former and the decline of the latter. While this might be cause for concern, especially when it can be seen that it leads increasingly to the growth of tyranny, it at least has had the merit of compelling many Christians, who might retain some concern for the culture of man and the life of creation, to realize that the long attempt to combine the two can no longer be carried through. Only when Christians learn to consider that they must base their ideas of culture and civilization on uniquely Biblical grounds will it be possible to take positive steps in the genuine recovery of the heritage of the West.

## Conclusion

One may readily surmise that the above reflection on the cultural themes of Western civilization, like so much that passes for modern erudition, is meant to serve as an indictment of our cultural patrimony. It may seem that it is meant to cast serious doubts upon the superiority of Western culture and, therefore, should be joined to the list of scholarly productions designed to foster a less chauvinistic attitude and invite a more sympathetically *multicultural* point of view. However, any such misunderstanding must be firmly laid to rest. It has not been my intention to encourage the view that, because the tenor of the preceding analysis has sounded a critical note, Western culture is less than the greatest culture that history so far has known. The heritage of the West is not one we may easily disparage or gainsay. Yet, while we may treasure our past with affection and gratitude, we may not study it with an uncritical eye to its blemishes and, more seriously, to its absorption of ideals and values which have troubled its course of development and have led to its present state of *spiritual* decline.

To be sure, at the present time, one hears the loud din of attacks coming from those whose singular aim is to trash the cultural heritage of the West. Some, no doubt, would wish to show all things Western only in a negative light. This antipathy has been met with great approval by those in the universities who have been encouraged to think of the West as a white, male culture of oppression. Such self-righteous opinion has become ingrained in the minds of our cultural elites. In spite of this, however, one should not take the view that every criticism of Western history derives from the same malicious intent to undermine its accomplishments, or to substitute in its place a cultural relativism based upon the notion that no culture is intrinsically or historically more advanced, better, or more to be desired than any other. That has not been our purpose at all. Nevertheless, we maintain that it is impossible to get at the roots of today's pessi-

mism and cultural relativism unless we acknowledge that Western culture has long born within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Should we fail to see this, we are apt to deceive ourselves as to the truth of our cultural heritage and, therefore, will not be in a position to offer a remedy to the deplorable state at which our civilization has arrived at the end of the second millennium.

From a Christian perspective, each and every cultural endeavor of man, Western man included, must be subjected to a careful scrutiny based upon what does not derive from culture itself, indeed, does not derive from man in any sense.<sup>1</sup> That is, the Christian perspective on all human life and endeavor must ultimately rest upon what can only be described as the Divine point of view, in other words, on *revelation*! Emil Brunner's words, in this respect, are apropos: "According to Christian faith, the meaning of life is not *in* man – neither in his rational nature nor in his rational or cultural work – but comes *to* him as a divine gift, as the Logos, which is the revealed Word, and as that Word which is the self-revealing God."<sup>2</sup> Indeed! The Christian ought not to accept that man is or can be other than what God says he is or can be. This is equally true for everything he does. "The self-revealing God" has told man in His "revealed Word" that man was made in God's image and given the gift of life by God. What is more, man should use his life in the service of God by cultivating those talents and abilities with which God has endowed him so as thereby to bring forth culture and civilization. God, in the Christian view, is the original author of culture. He gave it to man in the first place as a gift, and then

1. For a fuller and more systematic explanation of the *Christian perspective* that I have in mind, I would ask the reader to consult my other two books: *The Burden of God*, (Minneapolis: Contra Mundum Books, 1993), pp. 1–25; and, *On Stone or Sand*, (Carson, ND, Pleroma Press, 1993), Part I. I am aware that this is not altogether fair of me, but I fear that it would not only require me tediously to repeat myself but would burden the present work unnecessarily.
2. Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948) Vol. I, p. 71.

required it of him as a task to be completed. Most importantly, God gave it to man as a stewardship, as an entrusted responsibility, to be exercised only in service to Him and his Kingdom. Far from having invented culture or conceived it on his own, man was created by God to act as a cultural agent, thus to work for and accomplish God's will by fulfilling his calling and responsibility to realize culture. In his very nature man is a cultural creature. It is an inescapable fact. Furthermore, man has been this from the beginning of the world.<sup>3</sup> Man can only truly act in this capacity by knowing that his meaning as man is only made possible by consciously recognizing that it lies rooted in God and not in himself. Thus, when we take up the study of man's cultural efforts, we are required to evaluate them in the light of God's purpose and truth. This is especially true of Western culture for the following reasons.

First, Western culture is the most intellectually self-aware of all the world's cultures. Western man has, more than any other, sought to develop his culture as a product of a rational analysis which has also involved the effort to reflect philosophically upon the *Self* as an agent of analysis. In other words, not only does Western man seek to act in and know the world around him at the instigation of his reason, but he seeks, at the

3. This truth, of course, is denied by modern humanistic men who subscribe to the evolutionary model in explaining the origins of man. For them, man derived originally from an animal and lived for a long period as a primitive cave-dweller with little or no culture to speak of. It was only gradually that man, usually by external compelling circumstances, learned various cultural ways of acting. Man acquired the habits of culture from his need to adapt to his surroundings which, because they were harsh and indifferent to all life, man's included, enabled him to overcome his animal existence and rise to a more *human* level of existence. Human culture, then, is nothing more than the long-acquired ability of man to meet the exigencies of the cold and difficult environment of this planet. Culture, and its attendant civilization, on this scheme, is entirely a product of man's animal urge to survive and thrive against the natural cruelties of his chance existence.

same time, to ground all things in himself as the rational source of truth and knowledge. Western man firmly believes that the discovery of knowledge lies at the basis of culture, and that self-discovery lies at the basis of knowledge. Culture is not an accident of nature or product of chance, nor does it come as if it fell ready made from heaven. Rather, it is the result of a deliberate and conscientious endeavor by man to apply his reason to an investigation of the workings of the natural world and of himself as a creature who works to achieve goals. In the West, man has become supremely aware of himself as a being who not only has the capacity to live a civilized existence, but of having within himself a *power* to conceive of such an existence and, thus, to plan or deliberate intellectually on it in advance of its formation. By means of this *internal* power, man is in a position to transform the *outer* realm of existence in such a way, and to such a degree, as to improve himself and the conditions of his life. By the use of his reason, man can seize control of his world and direct it unto whatever goals he imagines or desires. Man need not live a primitive and savage existence, buffeted about by a hostile, or, at the very least indifferent, environment.

Second, because Christianity was itself an integral part of Western culture, there is an intimate connection between the Christian faith and the culture of Western man. Such a link is more than just adventitious, or merely external in character. Western culture was shaped by a potent religious force which was Christian. It certainly was not Muslim or Hindu, and it was the sole religion in the West to replace on any large scale the centuries of pagan devotion to a vast array of divinities and superstitious powers. At the very least, the West was formed by the impact of the church which institutionalized the ethical program of the Christian faith. Men were generally taught to think of themselves and their world as not only created by God but as duty-bound to submit to God and His will in all their conduct. Certainly this was true formally. Although men were not always obedient, there were not many, at least throughout the Middle Ages, who sought to question its general validity. And if men did not always submit to God, then they gave the appearance of



doing so by submitting to the church as presumably God's chosen instrument of command and control. The point is that Christianity, far from being an addendum to Western culture, was one of its principle shapers. It affected a civilizing influence by fostering a less self-serving and a more charitable behavior among men, provoking a greater respect for justice and mercy, and encouraging a God-fearing responsibility in all aspects of life and society. The Christian faith, despite the negative side which we have mainly stressed herein, promoted an active participation in the world as a proper arena of human endeavor, not to be despised as something un-*spiritual*. Men gradually came to realize that, besides being a *thinker*, God also created man to be a *doer*, one who should take up all forms of legitimate human endeavor as a service to God and a good to man. This inspired man with the cultural enterprise and Western civilization would scarcely have accomplished much of what it has without this Christian motive acting in man, whether he believed in the Christian faith or not.

Finally, Western man has a more highly developed historical consciousness. Culture, as we said, does not come ready-made; it has to be formed and shaped, and man is uniquely fitted to fulfill that purpose. This is a work that cannot be completed in a single generation, or even in a hundred generations. Each generation adds its own labors to the already accumulated reserves of previous generations. No generation can begin, or make its contribution, without first absorbing the work of those who have come before. No generation, in other words, can simply begin at the beginning, but each must start with the resources capitalized by fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers. The realization of this simple truth produces a unique type of outlook on life, one that has been described by the term *historical consciousness*. History is often merely thought of as the past. But such a view is simplistic and naïve. History is not just any past, or anything that belongs in the past. Rather, history is the account of those things in the past which have had a peculiar impact on the formation of a cultural heritage. Something is historical if it has served to advance or impede the workings of man who

endeavors to realize through his labors a cultural permanence. Events and persons can only act as historical agents when it can be seen that what they do in some way affects the total “accumulated reserves.” Western man has not only brought forth a spectacular cultural heritage, he has done so by self-consciously building on the deeds and words of previous generations. Thus, he has been productive of an outlook in which man is keenly aware that his work is but the on-going effort of those in the past who have provided him with the resources to advance a little further into the future and thereby to deposit a legacy for coming generations. Western man is shaped by the need to transmit the past to the future as part of an educational agenda meant to serve the interest of a higher life for the good of mankind, who is more than an animal driven by immediate and material urges but who possesses the spiritual nature of a creature made to realize his purpose as a cultural being.

These three facts must have an inevitable bearing upon the study of Western history and culture. Since this is so, we cannot avoid the question, “How do these facts appear in the light of a *genuine* Christian analysis?” If man gets his definition as a cultural creature from God, then he also gets his standard of cultural activity from God. Culture possess an unavoidable religious-moral character and motivation. Man’s urge to cultural activity and meaning derives from a deep-seated faith, and springs from a *spiritual* desire to act in imitation of his Creator in whose image he has been made. “Wherever spirit expresses itself,” comments Brunner, “there is civilized life; but what kind of spirit creates that civilization or culture is another question. Culture is an expression of the spirit, a formation by spiritual impulse...” But, as Brunner goes on to say – and this is a crucial qualification – “...this spiritual impulse can originate from the most different sources....”<sup>4</sup> By this, he means emphatically that it can derive from different religious motives. In other words, man may act in a God-serving manner, or he may act in a God-

4. Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization*, Vol. II, p. 129.

defying manner. Man's culture will necessarily follow the direction of his faith.

Although man was created with an innate cultural nature, one which destines him to act in the world after the example of his Creator, in the Biblical view it is clear that man has not wished to do so from any self-conscious desire to please God by conforming to His righteous prescriptions. At least, that was true from the moment of man's rebellion in the Garden of Eden. From that time to the present, man has only wished to please himself. That is, he has given expression to himself – he has developed his physical, mental, artistic, and other creative abilities – not from God-glorifying motives, but from purely self-idolizing motives. Man has replaced God with man as the central spiritual impulse to cultural activity. The Christian student of culture is necessarily required to acknowledge that this change in the motive direction of man's culture is due to sin and must not neglect to take this into consideration when he seeks to reflect on the cultural product that is the result of man's thinking and acting. Far from depriving man of the cultural urge, however, the Christian will recognize that all man's cultural ideals and valuations must stem from an apostate influence which then controls his incentive to produce culture and, in turn, directs the ultimate goal of culture. This has been no less true of Western culture, despite the presence of Christianity in its formation and progression, than of any of the world's cultures. What motive, then, has been at work throughout much of Western culture? What *religious* impulse can be seen at the back of its formation and development? And what impact has this motive had on the formation of Western culture, especially as it has come to bear upon the three principal factors of Western culture?

We said that Western culture was the most intellectually self-aware of the world's cultures, that it was here that man endeavored to apply the use of his reason as the principal tool in the formation of culture, and that man sought to ground all his rational labor in himself in order to deepen his awareness of his own meaning in the process. It was necessary, in order for man to know the world around him, to apply his reason to a careful

analysis of the workings of the natural world. This by itself is not the issue. That man was created with the capacity to reason, and that he ought to use it to achieve the goals of culture and civilization ought not to be seen as the *cause* of the humanistic motive that has had such a dominant hold on Western man. There are not a few Christians, especially, who think that the rational nature of man is itself a product of the Fall of man into sin. At the least, they sometimes assume that a critical application of reasoned analysis, more often than not, is the complete antithesis of faith, or that the philosophical task which has arisen in the wake of man's reasoned reflection on the world of his existence is an enemy *per se* of the Gospel of salvation in Christ. As a result, they tend to see faith and reason as two opposed cognitive departments of the human mind which can only be reconciled with great difficulty, if at all. And because faith has to do supremely with religion, and reason is the tool of culture, they tend to regard religion and culture as having little or no relationship to one another. But we do not subscribe to this view, nor do we maintain that the priority of reason in Western culture is something to be deplored. That man was meant to apply his reason to a study of his world and of himself, we take to be God's purpose for man. However, if we want to understand the *humanistic* motive of culture in the West, we are compelled to recognize that man has elevated his reason to the place of God. In other words, human reason has become an instrument of apostasy and self-idolatry. And it is this application of the use of his reason that Western man has brought with him to the task of culture. A humanistic motive predominates because man seeks the cultural task entirely from and within himself, without reference to God, and is resolved to believe that his reason is sufficient unto itself to grasp the truth and to form life in terms of it. Those in the grip of this motive believe that man's explanation of the world around him, as well as of his own place and purpose in it, is to be founded upon his reason alone, which is to say upon himself alone, and that man does not need to consult any source but himself in the pursuit of life and culture. As we have endeav-

ored to point out in our study, a perspective such as this has been productive of distinct cultural consequences.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the role that Christianity has played in the formation of Western culture, while it has had a positive moral impact, has not been altogether untainted by humanistic influences. In three areas especially, this humanism has been apparent: monastic asceticism, ecclesiastical hierarchicalism, and scholastic intellectualism which became a legacy of higher education in Western universities. Monasticism was a false piety based upon the notion that the material aspect of reality was the *cause* of the corruption of the spiritual aspect. Accordingly, it was thought necessary to achieve salvation by retreating from, and vehemently denying, all things pertaining to the body and man's material interests. It was a viewpoint heavily influenced by pagan Gnostic notions which theoretically divided reality into two antithetical dimensions: the higher and good spiritual side from the lower and wicked material side. Furthermore, it encouraged a false *spiritual* distinction between those who practice a withdrawal from life into the monastery and all others who live ordinary lives in the world. For the most part, it entailed a piety devoid of practical consequences for what Scripture calls the Kingdom of God, or the total governance of man's life by God's word in all areas of life and endeavor. Then there was the church, which became the principal institution of Christian importance. However, it was shaped and run more by pagan political ideals than by Biblical prescriptions. It involved an agenda which sought to bring all life under the control and domination of the church instead of encouraging all life to be lived in obedience to God. Finally, in the realm of intellect and learning, Christianity lost touch with its own presuppositions and adopted Greek theoretical concepts and ideals of reason as fully legitimate for the development of an understanding of man and his world. This led to a shaping of a worldview around the distinction between faith and reason, with the things of faith gradually reduced to a small *religious* area of thinking while reason was presumed free to explore and construct the world of man's experience with little or no concern for revelation from

God. In these ways, Christianity presented a compromised point of view. At the dawn of the Enlightenment, with the rise of modern science, Christianity was attacked as a quaint superstition and dispelled from all man's interests and concerns. Humanism had gained complete control of man's thinking in the modern world.

Lastly, we may remind ourselves of the consequences of humanism for the historical consciousness. With the complete triumph of humanism in the modern world a void has opened in the realm of ethics. For with the jettisoning of Christianity, man has gone in search of an alternative moral point of view. He has sought it in Romanticism which has placed all emphasis upon the rejection of historical accomplishment. A great effort has been made to find unity and meaning in the subjective selfhood of man in mere existential inwardness. Romanticism denounced the role of the reason as understood by the Enlightenment and has exalted the inward feelings as the source of truth and outward order. More particularly, it rejected God's standard of ethical behavior for a form of *freedom* conjured from the depths of human psychology. At the same time, it sought to give shape to a new ideal of man, one that would deliver him from the perceived oppression of inherited norms and structures, by calling upon him to revolt from the past in favor of a new totalitarian social ideal. Such a humanistic point of view has seen its consequences in the rise of the modern state as an absolute power over all human life and labor.

Given the imprint of these developments, how ought we as Christians to view the ideals which have done so much to shape Western culture? If such a strong humanistic impulse has been at work in motivating Western culture, are we simply to take the view that culture *per se* is unredeemable? What perspective can we offer that would enable us to place culture once again on a properly God-centered foundation? These questions, far from being academic, are of vital importance in our day given the existing state of crisis at the moral and religious center of the West. If we are to halt the slide into decadence that is everywhere in evidence, we must offer more than the usual pieties about the

need to recover a lost tradition, a sort of golden past, as if our past alone was sufficient to offer answers for the moral chaos of our times. We need, instead, a more Biblically conscious understanding of man as a cultural agent, and of what is the basis of a righteous culture as opposed to an unrighteous one. Our goal, then, should not be to jettison the cultural task, but to establish cultural activity once again in its correct, God-glorifying framework.

This work is certainly not the place to enter into a discussion of this sort in any but a most cursory manner. My intention has been mainly to concentrate upon the humanistic aspects of Western culture, in order that we may get a clearer image in our minds of the religious motive that has done so much to shape our heritage. However, in fairness, we shall offer, by way of a brief summary, a depiction of what a Christian perspective ought to entail for man as a cultural being. We shall do so by presenting the Christian view of man as such, one that accords with the Biblical idea and is therefore free from humanistic influences, ancient or modern. It is not inaccurate to claim that this Christian view has rarely been understood, much less declared, by those who claim to be Christians, now or in the past. We should not be surprised, then, if it has failed to make much of an impact on the formation of Western culture. Whether or not it can pull Western man, in his present state, back from the brink of the abyss is a question that we cannot answer. But whether it can or not should not be our main concern. Rather, we are bound to further the cause of genuine Christianity, for it is the only answer that can and must be given to a world whose cultural efforts are in vain if they are not founded upon the truth.

In his astute, and now much neglected, work, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, Reformed Christian philosopher and student of culture, Henry R. Van Til has written: "Man ... lives in covenantal relationship to the Creator.... As such, he is morally responsible for his actions and duty-bound to seek the good; he is also rationally able to comprehend the meaning of life and duty-bound to function in the realm of truth; he is a cultural creature, one who is able and is called to re-create, to re-pro-

duce, to form artistically and to mould creation to his will, duty-bound to function in the realm of power...to have dominion over the earth.”<sup>5</sup> A number of observations from this statement call for comment.

To begin with, we should take special note of the phrase “covenantal relationship to the Creator.” In defining man as made in the image of God, the Christian view must explain that this definition not only implies something about the nature of man, but also involves something that determines the directedness of his life. Man was not only made like God, or similar to God, he was made to live a God-directed purpose. Man stands related to God in a special way, described as “covenantal.” It means that man exists for the purpose of serving his Creator, that is, of acting in the world on His behalf. To be made in God’s image automatically includes this purpose. Man is not made in God’s image and then given the option of living his life *for* God or not as he wishes. Rather, he *must* live and think as a creature who is bound to please and serve God. The nature of his being inescapably entails this responsibility. To deny this is to deny that man is made in God’s image.

It follows from this that man, although he lives in the world and shares in the material reality of all things therein, does not live as determined *by* the world or for anything *in* the world. He was meant to live solely in relationship to God, the Creator. Of course, he should do so in the world, but not as if the world provided him his meaning and purpose. It is merely his arena of activity. The agenda of his life cannot come from himself or his world. This further involves the notion that man cannot discover his purpose or meaning by other than consulting with the God who made him. Neither can he realize his purpose by seeking it apart from God. In all his activity, man is not only dependent upon God directing his life, but man must consciously seek that direction by turning to God and obeying His commands. In the

5. Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1959) p. 30.



“covenantal relationship” God sets the agenda, but man also seeks to know the agenda and to conform with it in every area of life. There is, then, a “duty” or obligation placed upon man to bring every area of his life and thought into conformity with this God-determined purpose.

Thus, to be made in God’s image means much more than just to exist in a certain way, it also means to act or behave in accordance with a stipulated purpose. This implies that man is “morally responsible for his actions.” But, morally responsible to whom? Certainly not to man, for man, not being the source of his own being, cannot be the source of his own morality. As he derives his moral nature from God as part of the image of God in him, so he gets the principles of moral conduct from God as well. He is responsible, then, for what God tells him. In other words, his moral conduct is dependent upon *revelation*! In the Christian view, the Bible is itself the record of that revelation. Man must, therefore, be governed in his thinking and acting by Scripture. This is true of all that man does, his effort at culture included. The Bible is not just a source book for his soul, or how to achieve heaven, but it is concerned with his life; and it is concerned with *all* of man’s life, his culture as well as his person, society as well as the individual. To disregard or deny this fact is to treat God’s creation order with disdain. And to pretend that man can engage in the cultural task apart from a faith which governs his activity, or that he can exercise a faith that has no consequence for culture, is entirely out of keeping with the “covenantal” nature of the relationship between God and man. Therefore, to conjure up ideas of meaning and purpose, or to embark on civilizational or cultural goals without reference to Scripture, or in contradiction to Scripture, is altogether inappropriate so far as Scripture is concerned. The Christian, therefore, must look at the matter differently.

The moral responsibility of man implies more than just the need to do what God says in his personal life. It also requires that man act in conformity with God’s purpose for him in all that he does to enhance and build life. Man is a “duty-bound” creature, one who must function in especially three areas if he is to fulfill

his purpose as a man. He is, first, "duty-bound to seek the good." However, not knowing what the good is, because of sin, he must consult God's word. He must find out from God what is truly good. He may not imagine that he has the capacity to see or declare what is good by simply examining his own experience or the general experience of the race. He must begin by accepting the Biblical view that man is without any good in himself, or in anything he does, unless and until it conforms with God's definition of it. Thus, for example, he may not assume that certain social arrangements, or certain ways of thinking, are good if they ignore or eliminate from consideration God's standard of just dealings between men or if they encourage men to understand his world and himself in ways that undermine the authority of God and His truth. Furthermore, man may not construct a view of the material universe that reduces God either to a mere observer of events or ejects him from consideration altogether. Any and all attempts to promote an ideal of life and purpose merely from the standpoint of man's sensate experience and perception is necessarily bound to distort his understanding. Man must seek what is good on God's terms and oppose all man-centered ideals and valuations.

Second, man is "duty-bound to function in the realm of truth." Man is not a mere animal with appetites and desires. He is made to learn about the world he lives in, to understand it with his mind, and to know himself as responsible to God for what he knows. He is "duty-bound" to apply his reason to a study of his total earthly existence. He may not neglect his intellect, for it is the chief means by which he forms his nature as a man. But, once again, the truth must first of all be told to man who, because of sin, has lost all contact with the truth. Man may not simply imagine things to be true. For example, he may not say that the world is self-existing or eternal in nature, as the Greek thinkers did. Nor may he claim that the world came into existence on its own, without God having created it. He may not suppose, therefore, that life, man's life especially, is the product of chance or fate, and it is left to man to make of it what he will, God or no God. He must think of himself and his world as the

product of God, and he must explain himself and all things as existing to fulfill a God-decreed purpose. Furthermore, he must study his world to know it in its complete unity and not artificially divide it into false categories like form and matter, or thought and extension. He may not then assume that his reason can know only what is form or extension and is incapable of knowing anything about what cannot be touched or seen. Thus, he may not reduce religion to a category of his thinking and make science an independent authority. Man is, in all his thinking, a “covenantal” creature, one whose thought on every subject is religious through and through. For God does not just occupy man’s faith interests while his reason is free to draw conclusions about everything else. Though man may discover the laws that govern the operations of nature, he may not take the view that such laws are independent of God and his purpose. If God is not the central fact in man’s search for the truth, then that search is on the wrong track from the start, and man is bound to distort the truth.

Finally, man is “duty-bound to function in the realm of power.” Knowledge of the truth, or the good, while necessary to man’s purpose, by themselves can do nothing. Unless man is “empowered” to act in terms of them, they can do him no good, and he can achieve no results whatsoever. Power, then, is fundamental. Man must be able to fulfill his purpose as a man, and that purpose is “to have dominion over the earth.” Without the power to accomplish that goal, man would just be another living biological creature, no different from the animals. But even as his Creator has endowed him with the capacity to seek and find both the true and the good, so, too, He has endowed man with the power to bring to fruition what truth and goodness demand. He is given the ability, then, “to mould creation to his will.” And, what is more, he is “duty-bound” to do so. Not to produce culture and civilization is not an option. Man was not only constituted a culture-making creature, but he was charged with the obligation to conform his life to this God-ordained purpose. So, then, it is in man’s “covenantal” nature and responsibility to seek to build up culture, to explore the world he lives in, to explain it,

to improve it; in short, to exercise power over it for himself, but especially for God.

Power, then, is of central importance to the life of man. It is what sets him over the world he lives in. But even as truth and goodness require the addition of power in order for them to come to realization, so also man must exercise power in accordance with truth and goodness. For just as man was empowered "to mould creation to his will," yet his will must be in subjection to God and to God's creation order. In other words, he may not suppose that his will was free to mould or form as he wished or imagined, for man is not the Creator, but at most he can only "re-create," or "re-produce" what God had already made. It was intended that man should use his power to "think the thoughts of God" by learning to know God's works in accordance with God's supreme will. It is here that we approach the nub of the issue and its consequences for culture and cultural analysis.

"The cultural urge, the will to rule and to have power is increated."<sup>6</sup> We might say that man has a natural-born "impulse" to power. It is basic to his nature as man to seek to exploit this God-given power for the sake of producing culture and civilization. However, it must not be forgotten that man has fallen into the darkness of sin. A religious and moral perversion of his nature has now come to have control of all he is and does, including the "cultural urge." Man does not thereby lose the driving impulse of his nature, but it becomes an instrument of his rebellion against God. He still seeks the fulfillment of the cultural agenda, but now no longer on God's terms, or on God's behalf. Instead of developing his power, which is to say his talents and abilities, from a love for God and his purpose, he seeks rather to form his nature and his world solely from the motive of self-love. This religious change of direction will have undoubted consequences for his perspective on culture. He will interpret the discoveries of the natural world, along with his place in it, entirely in terms that suit himself. Rather than clinging to God's interpretation of his life and activity as revealed in God's word,

6. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, p. 34.

man prefers to follow the promptings of his rebellious nature. He may think that he is merely following the dictates of reason, but he is simply using his powers of reasoning to conjure a world of meaning from self-justifying motives – motives based upon a changed religious directive.

Based upon creation, man has been given the power to realize culture. But, as Brunner pointed out, man can exercise that power under the guidance of vastly different *spiritual* impulses. He can seek for and act on the basis of different, even opposite, *religious* motives. Indeed, the Christian, who studies the history of man's cultural endeavors, will undoubtedly recognize that a *humanistic* religious motive, as opposed to a *Godly* religious motive, has played a prominent role in the formation of human culture. This is true of Western culture as well, although Christianity influenced the development of the West. In looking back on two millennia of Western culture, it is possible to conclude that man's impulse to power, i.e., the urge to form culture, has given shape to a cultural product that bears more the stamp of man, the covenant-breaker, than of man, the covenant-keeper. And it is equally apparent that that culture is in a serious state of spiritual and moral crisis as a result. Whether or not Western culture is to continue into the next millennium will depend very much upon man becoming the cultural agent that God originally intended. This, in turn, will depend upon Christianity becoming a force for culture in a way that it has not been so far.



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