CHAPTER I

Successors to Roman Civilization

THE first phase of the history to be covered in this essay extends from about 600 to 750. During this period unity gave way to tripartition in the Mediterranean area, and one world became three. This era was marked first by the steady shrinkage of the Roman Empire and the consequent drastic internal transformation of that state. The changes were so overwhelming that some modern historians have felt it inaccurate to speak of a "Roman Empire" or even of an "Eastern Roman Empire" in the eighth century, and they have attempted to substitute the term "Byzantine Empire," derived from the name of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium, which Constantine chose as the site of his new capital and renamed Constantinople. The principal agents of this transformation were the Arab warriors who in the century following the death of their Prophet Mohammed in 632 conquered a huge empire stretching westward from their Arabian homeland across Africa to Spain and eastward to India and China. The Arab attack was not simply another barbarian invasion, such as those Rome had previously experienced. For the invaders were impelled by Islam, the new religion proclaimed by Mohammed. Islam supplied the creative element out of which arose a new civilization. Meanwhile Western Europe was stagnant and even retro-
gressive. Some of its Germanic rulers and a few of its spiritual and cultural leaders fought a losing battle against disorder and barbarism. With some justice this has been called the West's "Dark Age." However, even in the midst of darkness, the first feeble efforts were made to develop institutions and ideas suited to the situation in the West. In these efforts lay the genesis of a third civilization—Western European.

Transformation of the Eastern Roman Empire

The reign of Justinian I (527–565) is often cited as the turning point in the transition from an older "Roman" civilization to a newer "Byzantine" civilization. Actually the evidence relating to the period suggests that the conservative, backward-looking Justinian desired nothing less than to be accused of contributing to the decline of the old Roman order. His main efforts were directed toward restoration rather than innovation, and his reign marked a state of vigor within Roman society that had not been equalled since the fourth century.

His chief concern was with the recovery of territories seized from the Roman Empire by the Germanic invaders. Mustering all his financial, military, and diplomatic resources he directed his armies to a reconquest of North Africa from the Vandals, of Italy from the Ostrogoths, and a bit of Spain from the Visigoths, thus re-establishing direct control over rich areas that seemingly had slipped from Roman into German hands. Although Justinian's ambitions to reconquer all of Spain and Gaul were not achieved, he still ruled over a huge empire embracing North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Asia Minor, the Greek peninsula, the Balkan peninsula—south of the Danube, Italy, and a small part of Spain. Bureaucrats bearing ancient Roman
titles and operating according to ancient Roman administrative techniques carried out imperial orders in these provinces. The great emperor held sway at his Sacred Palace in Constantinople, deporting himself with a ceremonial pomp and majesty that had been slowly increasing since the second century. His every wish was put into action by a corps of highly organized and specialized civil servants who populated the Sacred Palace. The emperor's officials collected taxes, recruited soldiers, directed economic life, conducted courts of justice, and maintained peace and order in a fashion much like that of emperors after the reforms of Diocletian (reigned A.D. 284–305). The codification of Roman law under Justinian was in large part an attempt to muster the past traditions of Rome, especially those deriving from the time that Christianity had been accepted as the state religion, to the service of a highly centralized, efficient government. Justinian—again after the fashion of most of his predecessors since Constantine—considered himself a Christian emperor as well as a Roman emperor. In discharging his religious responsibility he took all religious matters under surveillance, seeking to impose a uniform dogma on his subjects, to assure that qualified and reliable men occupied the great church offices, and to extirpate heresy or schism wherever it existed. Justinian's efforts to promote prosperity in trade, industry, and agriculture were successful. The emperor was as eager a patron of learning and art as were his predecessors; thus such monuments as the Christian university and the great cathedral of Hagia Sophia with its magnificent dome and gilded interior arose to adorn Constantinople and to glorify the imperial name. At the middle of the sixth century “New Rome” seemed hardly less extensive, rich, and well governed than “Old Rome” had been. Perhaps it governed a few less provinces;
perhaps there was lacking some of the ancient enthusiasm for Graeco-Roman civilization among the populace; perhaps Greek influences were stronger than previously. However, it was still Roman in essence and seemed destined to last for many years, given Justinian's success as a restorer.

**Territorial Losses**

Justinian's successors found that the great emperor's work of restitution had been ephemeral and even dangerous, since the resources spent reconquering Africa and Italy weakened the empire against more dangerous foes along its eastern and northern borders. For a century and a half after Justinian's reign his empire suffered one crushing military defeat after another.

The first grave crisis developed during the last half of the sixth century, when dangerous enemies struck from the west, north, and east. In 568, only three years after Justinian's death, the Germanic Lombards invaded Italy, seizing most of it except southern Italy, Sicily, and a belt extending diagonally across central Italy from Ravenna to Rome. The Lombards persisted in their attacks on the remaining Byzantine territory in Italy for two centuries. On the Danube frontier a new power, the Avars, began to create an empire about 580 and immediately menaced the imperial frontier. As the Avar danger grew, Slavic groups seeking to escape Avar overlordship filtered across the frontier and settled in the Balkans, weakening imperial control there. In the east the Persian Empire, bribed into peace during Justinian's reign, resumed its offensive. The imperial government increasingly concentrated its resources on this frontier but could not prevent the loss of Armenia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt by the early seventh century.

The crisis of the first decades of the seventh century
was not entirely due to the vigor of the Lombard, Avar, Slav, and Persian assaults. Justinian’s heavy demands on his subjects had created internal difficulties within the Eastern Roman Empire. His despotic government irked important elements of the population, especially the aristocrats, whose intrigues constantly impeded the efficient operation of the state. These intrigues were often abetted by dissident elements within the army. Especially pernicious was the incessant religious turmoil arising from the continued efforts of the emperors to dictate doctrinal unity. The emperors found that any doctrinal pronouncement alienated some segment of the imperial population. In general, the government followed a religious policy that estranged the Christians in the eastern areas of the empire—especially Egypt and Syria—and made them welcome foreigners who would liberate them from the religious yoke imposed by the emperor and his servant, the patriarch of Constantinople. Thus the blows which rained from all directions upon the empire which Justinian had so proudly “restored” only a half century earlier seriously shook its internal social, political, and religious order, and the beginning of the seventh century seemed to presage its speedy destruction.

With the accession of a great emperor, Heraclius (610–641), however, the empire discovered the strength to avert complete disaster. He and his successors managed to re-group imperial resources and to repulse the onslaughts of the invaders. Heraclius inaugurated the new defensive policy by his vigorous actions against the Persians and the Avars. Between 622 and 628 the imperial forces delivered a crushing defeat on the Persian forces and rewon the rich eastern provinces of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, which had been overrun in the years from 611 to 619 while Heraclius
was restoring the army and administration. In the midst of the Persian wars the Avars drove ever deeper into the Balkans and attacked Constantinople itself, but they were repulsed in 626, amidst stirring scenes of popular patriotism and religious fervor, generated chiefly by the efforts of the patriarch, who organized a constant round of night vigils, processions, and sermons. They never again offered a serious threat to the safety of the empire.

The struggle against the Avars and the Persians was but a prelude to more desperate defensive battles waged by the imperial government. About 634 the Arab followers of the Prophet Mohammed began their first thrusts out of their desert homeland. With amazing speed these fanatic warriors wrested vital territories from the Eastern Roman Empire and organized their conquests into a new state that long remained a threat to its neighbors in the Mediterranean area. Between 634 and 638 Syria and Palestine fell to the Arabs in spite of the aging Heraclius’ desperate military efforts. The defeat was in part a consequence of the emperor’s religious policy. The native populations had been seriously disaffected by his efforts to find a doctrinal position that would reconcile Eastern Monophysitism, the belief that Christ had a single divine nature, with the view of other Christians in the empire that Christ was both human and divine. Many Christians in these areas preferred Arab rule to dictation from Constantinople. When Heraclius died in 641, the Arabs were already attacking Egypt, and his successor, Constans II (641–668), could not prevent the loss of that rich province. In the late 640’s the Moslems began to move westward across North Africa; by the end of the century they had seized the imperial provinces in Africa and were free to assault Europe through Spain. The government at Constantinople, however, could hardly con-
tend with the Moslems so far afield, for they were also beating at the very doors of Constantinople. While their armies were advancing victoriously the Arabs began to develop sea power, thus launching a struggle for control of the Mediterranean. Again the imperial forces found themselves on the defensive. Moslem sea power increased so rapidly that during the reign of Constantine IV (668–685) it effectively blockaded the sea approaches to Constantinople while Arab forces annually raided Asia Minor. Finally in 678 Constantine IV succeeded in defeating the Moslems besieging his capital and forced them to seek a truce. A decisive factor in repulsing the Arab fleet was the employment by the Byzantine forces of the dreaded Greek fire, a chemical mixture which was hurled into the midst of enemy naval formations by a special machine and which burst into raging flames on contact with the water. This defeat was one of the first suffered by the rampant Arab armies.

The check imposed on the Moslems in 678, however, gave little respite to the beleaguered empire, since a new power was emerging in the north in the form of the Bulgar kingdom. During the reign of Heraclius the pressure on the northern frontier had been reduced by the defeat of the Avars in 626. In the succeeding years many Slavs continued to settle in the Balkan peninsula, but they seldom posed an immediate military threat. The case was different with the Bulgars. This warlike Asian people settled at the mouth of the Danube about 650, and at that time the emperors were happy to use them against the Avars. The Bulgars, however, were soon at odds with Constantinople and in 679 defeated Constantine IV, forcing him to cede them territory and to recognize their state as a kingdom. Continuing their attacks against imperial territory in suc-
ceeding years, the Bulgars, who had increased their power by incorporating Slavs into their kingdom, posed a constant danger to Constantinople and all but crushed the sorely tried emperors by this added burden of defense.

The Arab threat to the empire became grave again early in the eighth century. The Moslems were now in the full tide of their military strength and were making their supreme bid to dominate the whole civilized world. Imperial strength was at a low ebb as a result of the overthrow of the Heraclian dynasty and the succession of a series of weak rulers. Capitalizing on this situation Arab armies and naval forces renewed their assault on Constantinople, having virtually occupied Asia Minor and even crossed into Europe.

Again a savior appeared, this time in the person of Leo, a military commander of Syrian origin who spoke Arabic and who is usually called "the Isaurian" to emphasize his eastern origin. Leo III (717–741) seized power in 717 at a moment when Constantinople, under siege, seemed about to fall. Through his skilled and determined leadership the capital was saved in 718, and in the succeeding years the Arabs were driven out of Asia Minor. By dividing many large estates in the liberated territories into small farms to support free peasants from whom soldiers could be recruited, Leo provided for an adequate defense against the Arab danger for many years. Toward the middle of the eighth century the Moslem world experienced internal troubles that culminated in a change of dynasties in 750 and a cessation of the rapid rhythm of Moslem expansion. Not until the eleventh century did the Turkish Moslems mount a vigorous offensive that again threatened the very existence of the Byzantine Empire.
By mid-eighth century the subjects of the empire could breathe considerably easier: the Eastern Roman Empire had been saved from the assaults of Lombards, Avars, Persians, Slavs, Arabs, and Bulgars. But their joy was tempered by the sobering fact that the empire had been drastically reduced in size and changed in ethnic composition during the preceding years. Syria, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa, most of Italy, and part of the Balkan peninsula had been lost. Whereas the empire of Justinian I had been composed of many racial and cultural elements, the reduced empire of the eighth century was basically Greek in language and cultural orientation. This change in size and composition is in itself justification for saying that a “new” empire, chiefly Greek, had replaced the old. The term “Byzantine Empire” is usually substituted for “Eastern Roman Empire” to denote this change.

Internal Reorganization

The rulers between Heraclius and Leo III (that is, between 610 and 741) further promoted the transformation of the empire by revolutionary efforts to organize the available resources of defense. Their efforts led to the militarization of Byzantine society. The imperial government had for a long time depended upon mercenary troops, imposing upon the state the double burden of finding competent troops and of collecting adequate income to pay them. The constant wars of the seventh and eighth centuries, resulting in the loss of valuable provinces and income, forced the emperors to find a new source of military strength. Their solution consisted of placing the military burden on a free peasantry. They accomplished this end by granting to certain peasants agricultural holdings in
exchange for military service. The usual practice was to settle soldier-farmers along a threatened frontier, assuring their services where needed. The soldier-farmers quickly became the backbone of the empire. The new system was used especially along the eastern frontier, thus increasing the role of the population of eastern Asia Minor in imperial history.

In order to utilize the new soldiery to the fullest extent, the emperors carried out a reorganization of the governmental system in the provinces. The old provincial system involving a complex set of military and civil officials was simplified by giving a military commander, called strategos, full military and civil powers over a specified area, called a theme. Each powerful general, dealing directly with the soldier-peasants in his district, became a formidable bulwark against foreign invaders who threatened his particular theme. The system far excelled in efficiency the older system of mercenaries. The subordination of the civil bureaucracy to the generals permitted the efficient direction of the total resources of the state toward the immediate military necessity.

The military and administrative reforms associated with the institution of the theme organization placed the peasantry in a vital position in the Byzantine state. The emperors took strong steps to protect the free peasantry, to assure their service to the state, and to curb efforts by aristocratic landowners to exploit them. Their legislation in this direction marks one of the most constructive phases of imperial policy in this era. The reforms checked an earlier tendency for the peasantry to become serfs laboring at the mercy of the landlords, thus creating a significant contrast with the fate of the peasantry in Western Europe in the early Middle Ages. And the reconstitution of the
social order in favor of a vigorous peasantry had the total effect of increasing the authority of the central government in its relations with the aristocracy.

Religious Changes

The seventh and early eighth centuries witnessed significant transformations in the religious life of the Byzantine Empire, these changes tending to accentuate the separateness of that branch of Christianity which was centered at Constantinople. Perhaps the most obvious trend was the increasing control of religion exercised by the emperor. This, of course, was not a new development, since all late Roman emperors often acted as both Caesar and Pope, combining with their actions as secular rulers a close regulation of religious life, control of the clergy, and intervention in disputes over dogma. However, during the seventh and eighth centuries, the emperors supervised the church more and more. In part their success was due to the willingness of Greek clergymen to exalt the emperor as leader against the infidel Persians, Arabs, Slavs, and Bulgars. Heraclius, for instance, was able to arouse a crusading fervor in his wars against the Persians by playing up the fact that he intended to recover the True Cross, which the Persians had stolen from Jerusalem when they captured the Holy City in 614. The emperor’s control over religious life was also strengthened by the final resolution of the long dogmatic dispute over the nature of Christ. This quarrel had repeatedly weakened the religious power of the emperors by forcing them to try to compromise with several dissident elements, compromises which repeatedly provoked wild riots in Constantinople and other imperial cities and which incited factions of clergymen, civil officials, and soldiers to defy imperial authority. The ultimate solution to this prob-
lem was possible only after the eastern provinces had been captured by the Arabs. Once these provinces, long so bitterly opposed to direction from Constantinople, were lost, the emperors could dictate a definition of the nature of Christ acceptable to the Christians remaining under imperial control. This was achieved by Constantine IV at the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 680, which commanded all believers to accept the doctrine that Christ’s nature was both human and divine. Few imperial subjects quarreled with this definition of the true dogma, and the religious role of the emperors was consequently exalted.

However, that the imperial dictation of religious policy was not as complete as the emperors might have wished can be illustrated by the bitter quarrel over iconoclasm that developed only a few years after the resolution of the Christological dispute. The complex issues of the iconoclastic struggle will be examined in detail later. At this point it is sufficient to say that the quarrel began in 726 when Leo III ordered that his subjects cease using all icons in religious services. Leo’s decrees were greeted with a storm of protest from clergymen and laymen, and although he resorted to forceful means to gain his end, he was unable to beat down the opposition. For a century after his reign the iconoclastic quarrel sundered Byzantine society, a reminder that the emperor could not always enforce his claims to dictate religious policy.

The generally successful, if increasingly autocratic, efforts of the Heraclian and Isaurian emperors to control religious policy had the further important effect of alienating the bishop of Rome, who was emerging as the spokesman of the Christians of Western Europe. From the pontificate of Gregory the Great (590–604) until the middle of the eighth century there was almost constant strife be-
tween emperor and papacy. During this era, as Rome was still politically a part of the Byzantine Empire, the popes looked to Constantinople for protection against the assaults of the Lombards. The Byzantine emperors attempted to capitalize on this dependence by compelling the popes to sanction their dogmatic pronouncements and to accept the spiritual overlordship of the patriarch of Constantinople. The conflict between Rome and Constantinople reached a climax at the middle of the seventh century, when the emperors were trying desperately to resolve the Christological question, and again in the early eighth century, when the iconoclastic question arose. To avoid accepting dictation from the East the papacy sought to rally the Christians of the west to its cause and thus to achieve a greater degree of independence. Although progress toward papal independence was slow and faltering, it was sufficient to open the way for the ultimate schism between eastern and western Christians.

The emergence of a Byzantine church, controlled by the emperor and confined geographically to the Balkan peninsula, Asia Minor, southern Italy, and Sicily, was certainly of great importance. Coinciding with the territorial constriction of the empire, with the militarization of the social order, with the de-Romanization of the population, and with the social and economic readjustment accompanying the military reforms, this development accentuated the uniqueness of the new Byzantine civilization, which was replacing the more universal civilization that had centered in Constantinople in the final stages of Roman history.

*The Birth of Moslem Civilization*

Probably the chief force effecting the transmutation of the Eastern Roman Empire into the Byzantine Empire was
the shattering attack inflicted by a new power emerging out of the Arabian desert. The Arab victories of the seventh and early eighth centuries represented the birth of a dynamic, enduring civilization destined to affect the history of the Mediterranean basin in a fundamental way. For the Arabs, originating as unorganized desert warriors, rapidly developed into a powerful community united by the well-articulated doctrines and moral precepts of the new religion of Islam.¹ The birth of this religion and its impact on the Arabs were therefore central events of the seventh century.

Arabia before Mohammed

The Arabian desert and its population present a confused picture at the moment when Islam emerged. The bulk of the inhabitants of this impoverished land consisted of semibarbaric nomads organized into warring clans, each of which jealously guarded its flocks, its customs, its gods, and its proud independence. Life among the tribes was painfully simple and poor when contrasted with the luxuriant civilizations of Rome and Persia flourishing beyond the frontiers of the desert. There seemed no force capable of overcoming the separatism, the clannishness, the backwardness of the desert dwellers. However, the nomadic way of life was not the only mode of existence in the peninsula. Around its fringes played the political, economic, religious, and cultural influences of Rome and

¹ The Arabic word “Islam” means submission to God and is used to designate the religion centering around the worship of God as taught by Mohammed and canonized in the Koran. The Arabic word for God is “Allah.” One who submits is called a Moslem. Moslems do not care to have their religion called “Mohammedanism,” since this implies that they worship Mohammed the Prophet and consider him divine; this idea is foreign to Islam.
Persia initiating new developments and producing new tensions.

It was at Mecca, the chief meeting place of the desert dwellers and the outside world, that the new religion of the Arabs was born. Mecca was the seat of a sedentary clan which, as was customary among the Arabs, was governed by the tribal elders. But Mecca was also an important trading center through which merchants passed leaving both products and ideas. Through the development of trade and the introduction of foreign refinements, the way of life of the Arab residents of Mecca was gradually differentiated from that of the desert nomads. At the same time Mecca became one of the major religious, even more than commercial, centers for the nomads, for at Mecca was located the famous Kaaba, a small temple housing the black stone which the Arabs believed had fallen from heaven as a sign of divine favor. The sacred enclosure where the Kaaba was located also contained many other objects pertaining to the gods worshiped by the desert tribes. Many tribes made annual pilgrimages to Mecca to render homage to their gods; but the Arabs were also attracted by the wares of the merchants who lived there or passed through. The rulers of Mecca bent every effort to encourage the centralization of Arab life in their city. Thus the complex life of Mecca generated forces of great significance—the seductive attractions, material and cultural, of foreign civilizations, the political appeal of a possible Meccan hegemony over the nomads, and the compulsive pull of common religious worship. It was the coalescence of these forces ignited by the Arabs' driving urge to transcend desert barbarism that suddenly catapulted them on to the stage of Mediterranean history as major actors.
Mohammed the Prophet

It was Mohammed, citizen of Mecca and prophet, who unleashed the Arabs. Born about 570, into a minor branch of the ruling clan of Mecca, he was orphaned at an early age and raised by relatives who directed him into a career in trade. Eventually marrying a rich widow by whom he was employed, he was assured of wealth, not to mention prestige, in the society of Mecca. Yet, since he seems to have been introspective, contemplative, and ascetic, these worldly successes may have been of small importance to Mohammed. Beyond all doubt or question he found his solace and his destiny in religion.

An impenetrable cloud of legend cuts us off from Mohammed’s early religious evolution. Perhaps foreign religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, or Zoroastrianism, all known in Mecca, discredited in his eyes the local Arabian beliefs and superstitions. Many scholars have insisted that Mohammed’s ultimate religious pronouncements consist of a skillful synthesis of foreign ideas selected to fit the needs of his fellow Arabs. To the followers of Mohammed, needless to say, this conclusion is sheer blasphemy. They believe, instead, that Mohammed received directly from the angel Gabriel the full content of the new religion along with the revelation that he had been designated as God’s spokesman here on earth. The first revelations occurred when Mohammed was about forty and from that moment he knew himself to be the Prophet, divinely ordained to utter the words of God and to convert his fellow men to the true faith.

Mohammed’s announcement of his new mission was not well received in Mecca. His early revelations stressed a personal religion centered on the obligation to worship
only the one God, and included the description of a last judgment where all men would receive reward or punishment, thereby indicating the urgent need for moral regeneration. For a people as individualistic as the Meccans all this held small appeal. Further his assault on polytheism was resented, particularly by those in Mecca who profited greatly from the annual pilgrimage of the desert tribes to the shrines of the old gods at Mecca. Opposition and indifference seemed about to doom the Prophet to failure.

After preaching to his unresponsive fellow townsmen for more than a decade, Mohammed decided to leave iniquitous Mecca for its rival Yathrib, whose residents showed an interest in his teaching and invited him to come and act as arbiter to pacify their quarreling factions. His emigration or Hegira to Yathrib occurred in 622 and caused the city to be renamed Medina or city of the Prophet. The Hegira proved to be a turning point in Moslem history, for thereafter Mohammed was the head of a state—albeit a very small one at first. His revelations took on a new complexion. Increasingly, they dealt with political decisions rather than abstract religious concepts. The simple preacher calling for personal conversions was transformed into the leader of a disciplined community of those faithful to God. Because they were set apart from the rest of the world by their submission to God, the community of followers of the Prophet was known as Islam. Increasingly Mohammed stressed the obligation of his followers to wage holy war against the nonbelievers for the glorification of God. On one occasion God spoke to Mohammed in this fashion: "Oh! Prophet, arouse the believers to combat. Twenty resolute men of faith will strike fear in two hundred infidels; a hundred of them will put a thousand of the faith-
less to flight.” This sense of mission, coupled with the habit of warfare already characteristic of the Arab way of life, supplied the spark for the militancy of the new community. With this organized force at his command Mohammed turned against his former tormenters and in 639 was able to make a triumphal entry into Mecca where he destroyed the false idols and introduced the worship of the one God. The way of righteousness seemed justified to the faithful by this victory. Many Arab tribes, including the chief leaders in Mecca, some perhaps converted by the Prophet’s religious teachings but others more likely impressed by Mohammed’s demonstrated prowess as a victorious chief-tain, hastened to join the community of the faithful. When Mohammed died in 632, he was the leader of a large confederation of Arab tribes whose union was built on acceptance of a strong leader and on a common religion. Having at last overcome their traditional disunity, the Arabs prepared to confront the outside world.

The Religion of Islam

Islam is a complex religion that has grown and developed for centuries; yet, like other great religions, its real vitality stems from certain basic beliefs and practices which date from its early history. Thus, at Mohammed’s death his followers already adhered to well-defined beliefs and practices which held the key to the wide appeal of the new religion.

Perhaps the best definition of the essence of Islam is contained in these words from the Koran, the sacred book of Islam: “O ye who believe, believe in God and His Apostle and the Book which He has sent down to His Apostle and Scripture which He has sent down formerly. Whosoever denieth God and His angels and His Books and His
Apostles and the Last Day hath strayed far from the Truth." Uncompromising monotheism is the central point in this simple creed; the association of partners with God was the most serious of all sins. A large portion of Mohammed's pronouncements were devoted to a description of God's attributes, and, although they were many, God was above all a majestic, omnipotent deity, so far removed from the human scene that man could only submit to His might. God had revealed Himself to men by speaking through angels to a series of prophets. Among the many "sent down formerly" were most of the Hebrew prophets and Christ, all counted as spokesmen of God. But the last and greatest was Mohammed. The earlier vessels of God's word had received only part of the truth, and their followers, by accident or intent, had "lost" the original word. The religion of Mohammed, moreover, was all-embracing. God's final revelation was intended not only for Arabs and those Jews and Christians who had previously received some part of divine truth, but for all men. For this reason it was written down in "the Book" or the Koran, every letter of which was binding on the faithful Moslem. Compiled shortly after Mohammed's death, the Koran was the record of the revelations he had received from God. Among these, one fundamental doctrine gave peculiar substance and character to the new religion—the reality of the day of judgment when the good would be rewarded and the sinful damned. By spelling out in vivid detail the joys awaiting the blessed and the tortures in store for the wicked, Mohammed imposed upon his followers an overwhelming sense of the urgency of religious obedience and moral righteousness. Even though these early articles of faith were expanded after Mohammed's death by the acceptance of a large body of *hadiths* or sayings of the Prophet, Islam
tended to remain a simple faith which subjected man directly to the will of almighty God and which provided divine directions for human conduct in an inspired book.

Mohammed also prescribed a simple set of religious practices to be followed by the faithful. Every Moslem had to pronounce a simple statement of faith: "There is no god but the one God, and Mohammed is His prophet." Five times a day a Moslem prayed in a prescribed fashion. Such prayer was a private affair. However, public prayer did develop in Mohammed's time, especially on Friday. For this purpose mosques were built, where the faithful gathered and followed a prayer leader, or imam, in rendering homage to God. Here the imam often preached a didactic sermon following the prayers. Other obligations of the Moslem were giving of his wealth to support the poor, fasting during a holy season as an expiatory act, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca once in his lifetime, if possible. These simple requirements made unnecessary the development of a highly organized clergy and a vast church organization. Among the Moslems, worship tended to remain a personal affair motivated by the piety of the individual.

Since the faithful could merit eternal life only if they were morally pleasing in the sight of God, Mohammed laid down the basic principles for a detailed and extensive moral code. The content of these regulations is too extensive to outline here, but in general it placed an exacting burden on the faithful. Rigid dietary laws enjoined all Moslems to refrain from certain foods and intoxicants. Gambling, perjury, and numerous acts of violence were condemned. Marriage customs were carefully defined with a view toward limiting and regulating the Arabian practice of polygamy. Slavery was sanctioned but with strict con-
trols. The Moslem moral law imposed much stricter rules of conduct on the Arabs than those to which they had been accustomed before Mohammed. In their puritanical tone many of Mohammed's laws resemble those of the Hebrew Bible. They impose on the faithful the same kind of obligation to practice sobriety, constraint, simplicity of life, and restriction of sensual gratification. The strong moral tone of the Moslem religion has always been one of its most attractive features.

With the establishment of Islam the world gained its third monotheistic, revealed religion. The three—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are the only such major religions. They are all intricately related by virtue of their historical descent. Judaism was the earliest one established. Christianity was introduced as a fulfillment of the Judaic revelation and absorbed into its teachings and practices many aspects of Judaism. Islam was proclaimed as a perfection of Christian revelation, its spokesmen recognizing the Judaic background of Christianity. Again many teachings and practices of Judaism and Christianity were incorporated into the Islamic religion. This close relationship may perhaps explain the relative ease with which men, down through history, have been converted from one of these religions to another. It may, paradoxically, also help to explain the frequent bitter quarrels among the adherents of the three religions over the question of which was the true revelation of God.

The Conquests

Moslem civilization was the product of Moslem religion. Islam transformed the important and quarreling tribes of Arabia into a dynamic world power that was to conquer one of the world's great empires within a little more
than a century after the Prophet's death. When Mohammed died there was a momentary threat that the Arab community he had founded would disintegrate. Mohammed had made no provision for his own succession. Obviously no one could fill his role as the one true prophet; still the nascent Arab community needed leadership. A few Arab tribes relapsed into their old separatist tendencies and tried to withdraw from the confederation once Mohammed's personal leadership had ended. At this crucial moment some of Mohammed's companions took matters in hand and designated his father-in-law, Abu-Bakr, as "caliph," or successor to the Prophet as leader of the community. During his two-year reign (632-634) he boldly forced defecting tribes back into the community of Islam and virtually completed the political unification of the Arabs. Two other able companions, Omar (634-644) and Othman (644-656), were elected, in turn, as successors of Abu-Bakr. These succeeding caliphs led an attack on the Eastern Roman and Persian empires, neither of which proved a match for the soldiers of Allah. Riddled by internal dissension and weakened by the attacks of Heraclius, the Persian Empire was completely destroyed and its territory occupied by 650. The Eastern Roman Empire, similarly enfeebled by religious divisions and by the assaults of many enemies during the preceding half century, surrendered its eastern provinces—Syria, Palestine, and Egypt—with ridiculous ease. As a result of these victories the Arabs advanced to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, where they soon developed a naval force and launched an attack on the very heart of the Byzantine Empire.

After Othman's death, the Arab advance was momentarily slowed because of the succession problem. The practice of electing caliphs suddenly engendered fierce con-
flicts among the Arabs and eventually led to civil war. Out
of this strife the experienced political leader Moawiya
emerged victor and in 661 founded a dynasty which came
to be known as the Umayyad. Under the capable leaders-
ship of this dynasty, the internal stability of the Arab com-

munity was restored and Arab armies resumed their con-
quests.

The chief thrust of the Umayyads was westward across
Africa. One after another the possessions of the Byzantine
emperors were conquered and the Berber princes of North
Africa subdued, until by the end of the seventh century
Arab troops had reached the Atlantic. But they did not
stop there. In 711 they crossed the Straits of Gibraltar,
quickly crushed the decrepit Visigothic kingdom, and an-
nexed all Spain except a few miniscule principalities in
the mountains of the northwest. Soon Arab raiding parties
began to probe across the Pyrenees into the kingdom of
the Franks, but here they met a more formidable foe. In
732, exactly one hundred years after Mohammed's death,
the Frankish prince, Charles Martel, defeated the Arab
forces near Tours. This victory marked a significant step
in the resurgence of Frankish power in Western Europe.
In Arab history it signified the high tide of westward ex-
pansion. Soon after 732 the Moslems withdrew south of
the Pyrenees, but not before they had established naval
supremacy over the western Mediterranean, leaving West-
ern Europe's Mediterranean shores vulnerable to their
raids.

In the meantime other Arab forces pushed eastward from
Persia and lopped off vast new conquests in Afghanistan,
Transoxiana, Turkestan, and western India. Arab armies
probed the western areas of China early in the eighth cen-
tury and seemed about to absorb the ancient but decadent
empire of the T'ang dynasty. The Chinese resistance, however, checked Arab advance in that direction.

During these far-flung campaigns the Umayyad princes found time and energy to hack away at the Byzantine Empire. They overran Armenia, repeatedly raided Asia Minor, and challenged Byzantine power at sea. On at least two occasions, in 674–678 and 717–718, Byzantium seemed on the brink of total destruction. But the imperial government in Constantinople, by skillful regrouping of its forces and by tapping its reserves, managed to avoid disaster. (The Moslems would not subdue Constantinople for over seven more centuries, until 1453.) The victory of the Byzantines over the Arabs in 718 was perhaps the decisive event in checking Arab expansion.

This bare enumeration of Arab conquests recounts an all but incredible achievement for a people so recently disorganized and powerless. The world had never seen so vast an empire created in a single century. By 750 no one would have disputed the emergence of a major world power capable of changing the course of history.

**Internal Development**

It still remains to be seen how the Arab conquerors succeeded as rulers of their huge empire. The problems of administration proved infinitely more difficult than those of conquest; but even so, the Umayyad caliphs were soon able to achieve some positive results.

During the first century after Mohammed's death his Arab followers played the predominant role in Moslem history, constituting themselves a military elite systemati-

ally levying tribute on non-Moslems, most of whom were also not Arabs, as a means of supporting the victorious sons of Allah. In general, the Arabs sought to maintain
themselves apart from their subjects. Living in exclusive military cities, they tended to permit local religious practices, customs, and even governmental institutions to continue in their conquered lands. Contrary to what is often believed, they did not try to force Islam on their subjects, preferring instead to keep the true faith as their chief mark of distinction. The policy of noninterference with existing ways of life made Moslem conquest relatively painless to its victims.

For all that they conducted themselves as a military elite ruling a vast horde of subjects, the Arabs still faced the difficult task of disciplining themselves sufficiently to maintain their supremacy. Mohammed had developed a vague theocratic state in which he as Prophet exercised political authority; and his immediate successors sought to continue this tradition. Their moral authority, however, did not prove adequate to sustain such a theocracy, especially after their Arab subjects poured out over parts of three continents. The early caliphs tried to control their troops by supplementing religious ties with a pension system sanctioned by the Koran whereby each Arab warrior received a share of the booty and tribute exacted from the conquered peoples. Since this system only bred greed and disappointment, the new Umayyad dynasty, when it succeeded to power in 661, attempted to institute a more orderly system of control. (Moawiya, its founder, had spent many years as governor in Syria and had observed the working of the Eastern Roman imperial system there. Once in power, he moved his capital to Damascus and proceeded to establish a bureaucratic government resembling the Roman system. The theocratic and patriarchal flavor of early Arab government gave way to a more secular state which emphasized sound organization and efficient administra-
tion. The success of this Umayyad system of government marked one of the highlights of early Moslem history, for never had the Arabs been as well organized and disciplined. By imitating the governmental techniques of more civilized peoples, the Arabs succeeded in establishing and ruling a great empire.

Conquest and political organization consumed most of the Arab energies and talents during the seventh and early eighth centuries. Aside from their religion, their language, and their poetry, the Arabs had little in the way of culture to offer to their conquered subjects, most of whom were their superiors in literature, learning, art, science, and philosophy. Down to the end of the Umayyad period in 750 their only notable cultural achievement was in the field of architecture, where they early developed a style suited to their mode of worship. Mohammed himself had built a place of worship at Medina consisting of an enclosed courtyard, partially roofed and containing a pulpit from which he could preach and lead services of prayer. This prototype provided a ground plan for the mosque which was imitated in one conquered city after another. The mosques built in the Umayyad period, however, became increasingly elaborate under the influence of local styles of architecture. The Arab masters employed native artisans who applied techniques and ideas derived from their experiences in building places of worship for their previous Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian masters. In this way several notable mosques were built by Umayyad princes, perhaps the most famous being the mosque in Jerusalem, called the Dome of the Rock, or sometimes in error the Mosque of Omar. Built by an Umayyad caliph determined to create a Moslem structure more splendid than the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Dome of the Rock
embodied many features of Byzantine architectural style, especially its dome and its brilliantly colored mosaics. At Damascus, another splendid mosque was characterized by local influences, in this case its distinctive minarets. Persian, Indian, and Greek artisans all shared in its building. But aside from the effort of the Arabs to create places of worship suitable to their religious practices, they brought few cultural contributions to their conquered territories during the Umayyad period. Most of the old cultural life of the non-Arab population of the Moslem Empire persisted unchanged. The masters borrowed things here and there as suited their needs, but pressing military and political problems left them little time or energy for cultural affairs.

And yet this was a period of incubation preparatory to the brilliant cultural renaissance that broke over the Moslem world in the eighth century. Of prime importance in this development was the spread of the Moslem religion from Spain to India. Not only did the Arabs themselves range over this huge area as representatives of Islam, but large numbers of non-Arabs began to accept the religion of the conquerors. By 750, Egypt and Persia were predominately Moslem, while in Syria there were numerous converts mixed with the Christians and the Jews. Even in the more distant provinces the number of converts mounted steadily. The conversions were not primarily the result of any compulsion or even missionary activity by the conquerors, who seemed content to retain their religion as an Arab monopoly. Nor was there any great advantage to be gained by conversion. During the Umayyad period the ruling Arabs generally taxed non-Arabs and excluded them from political and military life even if they did accept Islam. Most of the converts would seem to have been won over by the religious teachings of Mohammed, aided by the similarity
between Islam and the other existing religions which made conversion relatively easy.

The spread of Islam inevitably stimulated cultural exchange and growth. As the Arab Moslems encountered other cultures, they found it increasingly necessary to weigh them against their religious ideas; and as non-Arabs accepted Islam they were faced with the problem of readjusting their old cultural values to the teachings of the new religion. The resulting synthesis provided the impetus for the creation of a vast new Moslem culture. The spread of Arabic as a common language provided the instrumentality for its development and diffusion. Although the Arabs did not impose their language on their subjects, it was widely adopted during the Umayyad period, since Moslem custom discouraged the translation of the Koran, thereby forcing all who wished to adhere to the new faith to learn Arabic.

Thus during the first century of Moslem history the Arabs put themselves in position to become heirs to all the earlier civilizations existing in the lands they had conquered. As Moslems, however, they were obliged to judge whether the foreign cultures met God's approval, which meant that they had to scrutinize all aspects of cultural life within their empire. Synthesis was clearly the logical outcome of this situation; and, though this monumental task was not completed immediately, nevertheless Arab conquest and the spread of the Moslem religion prior to 750 had set the stage.

Beyond question, during the first century of its history Islam had rudely shaken the Mediterranean world. A new religion and a new military power had erupted to revolutionize the religious and political geography of large areas in Africa, Asia, and Europe. The emergence of this new
power placed older states and religions in extreme jeopardy. And the internal conditions within the new empire presaged a vast cultural upheaval and a new alignment of spiritual forces. The birth of Islam in the seventh century pointed toward a new chapter in history.

Western European Society

Certainly the main interest in the seventh and early eighth centuries is concentrated in the eastern Mediterranean area, where the remnant of the old Roman Empire assured its continued existence by a radical regrouping of its political, social, and moral resources, and where a militant new power emerged and grew strong by utilizing the resources of older civilizations. Over Western Europe there hung an air of stagnation and retrogression on all levels of life, suggesting that the barbarian mode of existence had finally gained the upper hand. The gloom of this situation seemed to deepen as the period wore on, and yet even in the midst of so many difficulties one can discern signs that Western European society was slowly finding solid foundations upon which to construct its own peculiar way of life.

Political Chaos

Probably the most dismal aspect of Western European life after 600 was the decay of governmental institutions and the consequent reign of violence. By the end of the sixth century four Germanic groups dominated Western Europe: the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, the Franks in Gaul, the Visigoths in Spain, and the Lombards in Italy. The political history of Western Europe in the early Middle Ages presents a grim record of war, court intrigue, and grave injustice. And this general state of disorder was too
often attributable to the conduct of the rulers of the Germanic kingdoms. Out of the depressing story of political affairs, however, certain broad conclusions about the nature of Western European political life in this dark age do emerge.

The Germanic rulers contended with immense problems which militated against the establishment of sound political order. As a minority which had established a dominant position by conquest, they could command little moral authority over their subjects. Since the boundaries of their states were usually ill-defined, they were involved in endemic warfare to gain new or defend old territory, especially in England, where several small Germanic kingdoms coexisted in a state of perpetual warfare, and in Italy, where after 568 the Lombards competed incessantly with the Byzantine emperors for control of the peninsula. In addition, they were subject to repeated attacks by foreign invaders. The Arabs began the destruction of the Visigothic kingdom in 711, and Slavic hordes continually harassed the Franks along their eastern frontier. Finally, the Germanic rulers faced the unhappy task of governing a population that had once enjoyed and still remembered the services supplied by the highly organized, essentially humane imperial regime of Rome; any comparison between the old Roman Empire and the new barbarian kingdoms could not but discredit the Germans.

In spite of the magnitude of the task most Germanic rulers tried, during the sixth century, to organize their kingdoms on the model of the Roman government that had preceded them. So great were their efforts, if not their lasting achievements, that one authority on early mediaeval institutions has argued that the Germanic invasions caused no real change in Roman civilization. Exaggerated as this
claim unquestionably is, some of the early Germanic regimes seemed to promise a stable political order not radically different from that maintained by Rome.

The Germanic princes, however, were too little removed from barbarism to make such a transition; and these early promises were not fulfilled during the seventh and early eighth centuries. The ambitious monarchical regimes of the sixth century were little more than facades hiding a wide variety of grave political ills. The kingdom of the Franks in Gaul under the Merovingian dynasty might well serve to illustrate the fate of Germanic states founded within the territory of the moribund empire.

(Merovingian) history impresses the reader with nothing so much as the contrast between the pretensions and the powers of its kings. All successors of Clovis (481–511), the founder of the dynasty, claimed absolute authority, but between the end of the sixth and the middle of the eighth centuries their actual power dwindled away to nothing. The causes of this decline were numerous. Most of the Merovingians, incapable of surmounting their barbarian political tradition, created an atmosphere of violence and tyranny by their unmitigated use of force to gain their political ends. Few royal dynasties in all history can match the record of violence and brutality of the rulers of the last half of the sixth century, as recorded by the contemporary bishop of Tours, Gregory, in his History of the Franks. Even more ferocious were their wives, especially Brunhilda; a Visigothic princess married to King Sigebert and referred to by her contemporaries as “the second Jezebel,” and Fredegunde, the slave mistress of King Chilperic, who became his queen after strangling his first wife, the sister of Brunhilda. Fredegunde subsequently fanned the hatred of Brunhilda even more by arranging the murder of
Sigebert and by urging Chilperic to seize the inheritance of Brunhilda's sons. The numerous acts of violence of these indomitable queens, perpetrated to further the interests of their husbands and offspring, dominate the history of the last part of the sixth and the early years of the seventh centuries. Perhaps the only excuse for their conduct was the fact that scheming relatives and greedy nobles goaded them to crime by equally heinous deeds. At least these figures were dynamic and forceful, which is more than can be said for the succession of kings who ascended to the throne in the last half of the seventh and early eighth centuries. Debauched by the excesses of the court at an early age, they usually died while still in their thirties, and were followed by sons of the same despicable character.

Having only the vaguest notion of public welfare, the kings seldom attempted anything resembling positive services for their subjects. In accordance with ancient Germanic custom they treated the state as private property to be divided among all their male heirs, thus breeding vicious family quarrels that consumed their energies and frequently flared into devastating civil wars. By the end of the seventh century, repeated partition had fragmented the once unified Merovingian state into at least four separate kingdoms. And even on those rare occasions when a Merovingian ruler sought to rise above greedy ambition and petty quarrels and develop some constructive program, he found himself frustrated by the bewildering array of laws, customs, religious practices, languages, and levels of culture which rendered impossible the application of any single policy to all his subjects.

Thus the Merovingians—plagued by barbarian habits, lack of resources, inadequate concepts of government, and a multiplicity of other problems—never succeeded in domi-
nating their situation. In the derisive words of a ninth-century author they became “do-nothing” kings, content to ride in open carts from one of their private estates to another, and to intrigue among their kinsmen for bits of territory. Incapable of establishing peace and order, by their very failure they fostered the spread of that anarchy within which the new political institutions of Western Europe were to take root.

Unable to provide more than a rudimentary government themselves, the Merovingian kings were forced to share political power with the great landowners. The rise of the landed nobles to political power was a tortuous process; it was also a development of such fundamental importance that it distinguished Western Europe sharply from either Byzantium or Islam. Beginning during the last days of the Roman Empire, this development was accelerated under the Germanic kings, chiefly because they lacked sufficient money income to support the services of government. Their only recourse was to call upon their subjects to render political services at private expense, especially in military expeditions, in the maintenance of internal peace and order, and in the administration of justice. Only the wealthy could respond, and they demanded as a price for their services additional grants of lands from the private estates of the king and the right to govern their own estates as private realms. By this process the kings depleted their resources and divided their power; at the same time the nobles acquired more land, instituted private governments, and subjected the bulk of the population to their immediate authority. The kings tried to ensure the loyalty of the landowners by requiring of each a personal oath of allegiance, a process called commendation, which placed the nobles in a special category above the mass of the people
and forced the kings to devote their major energies to guarding their position against the encroachments of their powerful vassals.

These early steps in the evolution of what eventually was to be called the feudal system caused tremendous strife. The line between the authority of the king and the nobles was so indefinite as to ensure a continual struggle between them. The new system nevertheless provided a basis for the restoration of order. The powerful nobles, each entrenched in a small area, could protect and control the population in their immediate localities. Yet above them stood the king as a source of their authority and a symbol of the commonalty of the larger group. This system was primitive compared to the contemporary regimes of the Byzantine emperors or the Umayyad caliphs, but under it the West began to develop its own characteristic political organization.

Economic and Social Development

Western Europe also suffered a gradual but desperate economic depression between 600 and 750. Its causes have been much disputed, being attributed in turn to the economic backwardness of the Germans, the cutting off of the Mediterranean trade routes by the Arabs, the financial abuses of the late Roman emperors, and the failure of manpower. If the causes are confused, the manifestations of depression were clear. Trade fell off steadily until by mid-eighth century, it was practically nonexistent. The failure of trade paralyzed city life. It was not uncommon for seventh-century observers to complain that grass was growing in the streets of the blighted cities. Traders and artisans disappeared and with them went a considerable part of the technical competence of the West.
The population of once-thriving cities was forced to resort to agriculture as a means of livelihood; land became virtually the only source of wealth, and the old money economy vanished. Agricultural life centered increasingly around the large, often huge, estates known as latifundia or manors which were already nearly self-sufficient. The heirs of the old aristocratic landowners who had once played an important part in the economic and cultural life of the cities now tended to spend most of their lives on their estates. Small farmers deprived of markets, not to mention police protection, together with wandering refugees from the dying cities now made up the labor force on the landlords' estates, in return for which they received small parcels of land to be used for their own livelihood. Numerous forces combined to create a social order in which members of this peasantry were required by law or custom to remain attached to the estates on which they were born, thereby producing the new status of servitude.

The decline of trade and urban life and the growing dependence on an agriculture which was centered in isolated estates drastically reduced the standard of living of Western European society, hastened its division into two classes of landlord and serf, and fostered an extreme provincialism of outlook. In these ways Western Europe contrasted sharply with the more prosperous and diversified societies of the Byzantine and Moslem worlds, and its economic and social backwardness was destined to last for several centuries.

Religious Life in Western Europe

While the Germanic kingdoms of Western Europe painfully constructed a new basis for their society in a political order which was dominated by landed aristocracy and
an economic system which was comprised of self-sufficient
manors, their religious institutions were undergoing a com-
parable transformation—a transformation that was to pro-
duce a Christian establishment fitted to the needs of the
time and confined to the geographical area of the West.

Perhaps it is fitting to recall here that prior to 600 A.D.
the church had already developed its basic organization,
doctrine, liturgy, and moral code. These aspects of Chris-
tian life had survived the decay of the Roman world amaz-
ingly well, thus giving the church tremendous resources
with which to face the new age. As was suggested in the
discussion of Christian life in the eastern Mediterranean,
the most significant religious development during the sev-
enth and eighth centuries was the division of Christendom
into separate “churches” and the consequent modification
of established institutions to fit them into their new com-
partments.

The church in Western Europe was set apart from other
churches by virtue of the fact that from the fifth century
onward it could no longer rely on the beneficent support
of a strong government. The Germanic princes were Chris-
tian and tended to support the church, but they usually
harmed and weakened it by their brutal methods and po-
litical ineptness. Instinctively they fostered the growth of
“national” churches within their realms, thereby further
disrupting such unity of Western Christendom as might
have survived the decentralization and disintegration of so-
ciety. At the same time the religious leadership of the bish-
ops was severely strained by the growing wealth of the
church. Since the bulk of that wealth was necessarily in
land, the bishops became landlords and inevitably assumed
the political duties that were becoming inseparable from
the control of large estates. Their political and economic
duties absorbed most of their energies, leaving little time for their religious responsibilities. Because the office carried wealth and power, competition for episcopal sees became vicious, the strong usually winning over the pious. The typical bishop of the seventh and eighth centuries was a warlike, worldly figure not overly concerned with spiritual affairs, and his shortcomings were reflected in the declining quality of his priests. These men were unlettered, ignorant of the rudiments of doctrine, unfamiliar with liturgy, and lax in moral life, and since it was they who represented the church in the parishes it was not surprising that superstitions, pagan usages, and gross immorality characterized the lives of the great mass of the people. Christianity no less than the other aspects of Western civilization was barbarized by the Germanic invasions.

At just the moment when barbarism permeated religious life most seriously, new divisions weakened the unity of Christendom. Issues of dogma and discipline were beginning to pull the Byzantine church away from the Western tradition. Although the schism was still not complete by 750, mutual exchange was increasingly tenuous, and the possibility of *rapprochement* was seriously reduced by the inability of the Byzantine state to protect its Italian holdings and maintain free communication between the West and Byzantium. The Moslem seizure of Armenia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain, which was accompanied by extensive conversion of Christians to Islam, represented not merely a serious reduction of the Christian population but, in addition, a cruel blow to Christian unity. It limited the relationships between the numerous Christians of these areas and those of Western Europe to a rare and generally unfruitful exchange of letters between bishops or an occasional Western pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Western
Christians were, in effect, cut off from the rest of the Christian world.

Confronted with difficult problems caused by the barbarization of society, and isolated increasingly from other Christian communities, the church in the West faced a serious crisis. It did, however, succeed in finding ways of dealing with some of its problems which were to contribute in an extremely important way to the development of the mediaeval church.

In an age of weak and aimless rulers, secular governments abandoned all responsibility for the welfare of their subjects. The church, with more positive leadership, shouldered the burden of caring for the weak. It maintained the only existing hospitals and schools. Its ideas of justice and mercy penetrated and tempered the harsh Germanic law codes. Educated clergymen served kings in numerous political capacities, thereby putting the church’s stamp on political development. As its participation in social activity broadened, the prestige of the church increased. As a consequence it played an incalculably important role in shaping new standards of social welfare and reawakening the social consciousness of Western Europe.

Another accomplishment of the church was its continued success in winning converts through the efforts of its missionaries. The process of converting the Germanic nations who had invaded the Roman Empire was finally completed during the seventh century with the Anglo-Saxons in England. Although both Irish and Roman missionaries exerted strong influences in England, the Roman forces eventually predominated, especially in organizing the new converts and in instituting the outward practices of the church. Throughout the seventh century, Irish missionaries labored to destroy pockets of paganism on the continent, especially
along the eastern frontier of the Frankish kingdom. Early in the eighth century English missionaries directed by the papacy penetrated the trans-Rhine area and began the conversion of Germanic groups that had never invaded the old Roman Empire. The missionaries operating in these areas represented the force of civilization assaulting barbarism on barbarian soil and made Christianity a basis for communication between the German leaders within the old empire and those without. Through these efforts the nascent Western European civilization began to spread and to develop. Under proper leadership, religious reform could be more easily instituted where the church was newly established than where it was already bound by tradition. England, for example, became the center of piety and learning for the whole West during the seventh and early eighth centuries, and her churchmen exercised a strong influence outside of England as well. In a somewhat similar way missionary work also offered the bishop of Rome an opportunity to organize new territory under his jurisdiction, and thereby increase his authority.

Overshadowing, however, both the extension of its role in society and the expansion of its jurisdiction into new geographical areas was the achievement of the church in producing institutions capable of restoring discipline within Christian society and of deepening its spiritual life. In this respect the seventh and early eighth centuries were especially important because of the growth of the papacy and the spread of the Benedictine monastic order.

The papacy had established itself as an important force in Christendom long before the seventh century. Guarding the tradition that Rome was the prime episcopacy in Christendom by virtue of Christ's commission to Peter and Peter's subsequent choice of Rome as his see, the bishops of Rome
had slowly built up a reputation as a source of doctrinal orthodoxy and proper disciplinary regulation. They had acquired extensive wealth and played an important role in political life in Italy, especially during the era of the Germanic invasions and the collapse of Roman government. During the sixth century, however, the power and prestige of the papacy was threatened first by the resurgent power of the Eastern Roman Empire and then by the invading Lombards. Justinian’s conquest of Italy placed a political master over the popes, a master who insisted on dictating religious policy and who responded to Roman claims to supremacy by supporting the counterclamors of the patriarch of Constantinople. Then in 568 the Lombard invasion thrust the Italian peninsula into war and constantly threatened the capture of Rome. Papal influence was also weakened by the strong tendency of Germanic kings to assert control of the churches within their lands.

At this critical juncture the Roman papacy was saved from these menacing forces by the inspiring genius of Pope Gregory the Great (590–604). Descended from a noble family, the young Gregory received a good education designed to prepare him for service in the imperial government. He soon abandoned his public career, however, to become a monk, which by his own admission was all that he ever desired to be. He was drawn into the service of the papacy as a legate to Constantinople and then elevated to the papal office in 590, chiefly because of the demands of the Roman populace, agitated at the moment by a terrible plague. Throughout his pontificate he remained the good shepherd to his Roman flock, gathering grain to feed them, lifting up their spirits with powerful sermons, and organizing various activities to relieve the miseries of the sick and
the helpless. His talents found more than a local application, however.

A man of deep religious fervor and hardheaded practical sense, Gregory launched a policy of making the papacy politically and economically independent while increasing its spiritual leadership in the Christian world. To lay the basis for political and economic independence he husbanded the papal property in Italy. To reduce papal dependence on any outside political power, he maneuvered to become a mediating force in the Italian struggles between the Lombard kings and the Byzantine emperors. But his efforts to create an independent secular power did not exhaust his energies. Gregory earned his greatest fame as a spiritual leader, especially gifted in stating Christian doctrine in a language suitable to the mentality of Western Europe. His sermons, his commentaries on Scripture, his pastoral instructions, and his inspirational writings became a basic part of the religious tradition in the West and everywhere served to deepen spiritual life. He showed an interest in refining Christian liturgy and establishing a standard usage. He was responsible for directing a missionary party to England which succeeded not only in winning numerous converts but also in organizing them under Roman leadership. Under his guidance the Roman see assumed a new prominence throughout all Christendom. And yet it is clear that Gregory's policy of building papal authority was a step in the direction of creating a separate Western church. His attempts to escape any dependence on the Byzantine Empire, his simple writings in Latin, his careful efforts to tie newly converted peoples to Rome all tended to confine and concentrate the effective leadership of the papacy to the West.
Although none of Gregory's successors approached his achievements, all continued his policy and contributed to the development of the papacy. During the eighth century they enjoyed notable missionary successes among the Germans east of the Rhine. They also took an active interest in spiritual and moral reform, particularly within the Frankish church. In addition, their efforts in the definition of dogma and the promulgation of a uniform ritual were so successful that it is usual to speak of "Roman" Christianity spreading in the seventh and eighth centuries. This aspect of papal activity was notably demonstrated in its triumphant resistance to the iconoclastic decrees of the Byzantine emperors. In this context continued adherence to Gregory's idea of papal independence was particularly important. Although still nominally subject to Byzantium, the popes were able to escape close control by playing the Lombards off against the emperors. When, however, the emperors became increasingly concerned with problems in the east, the popes found themselves at the mercy of the Lombards and only escaped their domination by persuading the Franks to assume a protectorate over the papacy. An event of incalculable significance, this alliance inextricably bound the popes to a western policy and reinforced the position of the papacy in Western Europe.

The evolving role of the papacy as an independent political force and spiritual leader in the west was also greatly assisted by the spread of Benedictine monasticism. Christian asceticism, stressing withdrawal from worldly affairs in order to serve God better, had originated in the east as early as the third century and had flowered in many forms in succeeding years. In the west this manifestation of Christian piety was channeled into a unique and admirable form by the genius of St. Benedict of Nursia (480–543). Born an
Italian nobleman, he gave up a promising public career to become a monk. Eventually he founded a monastery at Monte Cassino in Italy, where he devised his famous Benedictine rule to guide the daily life of the members of his community. The essence of this rule was contained in the idea that God could best be served by a community of dedicated men who divided their energies between prayer, study, and manual labor. To maintain the necessary discipline the rule gave the abbot extensive authority over the community. It also required the monks to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, thereby cutting them off from the material, personal, and political problems of the outside world and freeing them to concentrate their energies on the work of the monastery and the worship of God.

Benedict's rule was adopted by monastic communities throughout most of Western Europe during the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, thus creating an elite corps of "soldiers of Christ" whose services to the barbarized society in which they operated were incalculable. Of these services perhaps the most important was the example the Benedictine monks set for piety and moral excellence. They were especially fitted for the role of leadership in religious reform. They helped to guide the bewildered Europeans in the proper performance of the Roman ritual and played a major role in its dissemination. They served as teachers, transmitting to the ignorant a deeper understanding of the basic tenets of the Christian faith, and they led in the reorganization of charitable activities. Along with the Gospel, they also spread among their pagan neighbors technical knowledge and skill, their well organized monastic estates serving as models of good farming. All of these developments followed from the peculiar nature of the Benedictine rule, with its emphasis on a communal life of mod-
eration, balance, and discipline. Perhaps the ascetics in the east excelled the Benedictines in an ability to perform feats of physical self-denial (for instance, sitting atop a pillar for thirty years, as did St. Simeon Stylites) or in a grasp of the intricacies of advanced theology; but the Benedictine glory lay in their singular ability to grapple with the peculiar religious problems of the West.

On the whole, then, this was an era of considerable creative activity in western Christendom starting with the emergence of a Western European church able to exist in its own right. No one, of course, had abandoned belief in the existence of a universal community of Christians, but the divisive forces of the period seemed clearly to be fragmenting universal Christendom and favoring the development of separate churches, each with its own institutions and orientation.

Cultural Development

Amidst the difficulties besetting Western Europe after 600 A.D. one would not be surprised by a decay of arts and letters. The seventh and early eighth centuries were in general characterized by a decline in the level of cultural life in Western Europe. The remnants of Latin culture were badly neglected, and there was little of freshness or vigor to take its place. The weight of barbarism, political chaos, violence, isolation, and poverty bore too heavily on society to permit any great creative activity, and the period has thus become known as a "Dark Age."

Yet this generalization must be qualified, for there were some positive developments, among them the efforts to preserve parts of classical culture. Benedictine monks, taking seriously their founder's order to study, laboriously copied the works of classical authors and the church fathers for
their tiny libraries. To use these works they needed Latin, and therefore compiled simple textbooks for its study. Schools were established to teach the rudimentary knowledge needed to carry on monastic study. A tenuous link was thus maintained with the dying classical world, a fact of major importance to later Western Europe. Under certain favorable conditions, especially in newly established Benedictine monasteries, a few individuals were able to study and write. In the early seventh century Spain produced an outstanding man of learning in Isidore, bishop of Seville. Beside writing important theological tracts, Isidore compiled a huge encyclopedia, called *Etymologies*, consisting of scraps of knowledge drawn from a wide range of classical authors and pertaining to numerous different subjects. For several centuries it was a popular source of information among scholars throughout the West. A brilliant cultural life was also sustained in Irish monasteries in this period. Irish scholars even retained an ability to use Greek long after it had disappeared elsewhere in the West. Irish manuscript illuminations of this era represent the finest art work of the early Middle Ages. Some of the Irish enthusiasm for learning was transported to England by missionaries. In late seventh-century and early eighth-century England there emerged a long line of monastic scholars who produced histories, theological discussions, poetry, Biblical commentaries, and even scientific tracts. Bede was the most famous of these English scholars, his influence being felt all over the West. His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which traces the institution of Christianity in England, supplies a remarkably full picture of the condition of life in the semibarbarian Western world of the sixth, seventh, and early eighth centuries; moreover, it sets an exceptionally high standard of accuracy and good
literary style. These islands of intellectual and literary activity prevented total sterility in Western European cultural life and served as a base upon which future cultural achievements would be constructed.

The dominance of the church in Western Europe's feeble intellectual life was in itself a vital development, for the clerical and monastic scholars inevitably selected the aspects of classical culture that suited their religious and moral convictions while disregarding what was more secular. They tended to devote their creative energies to pursuits that were religious while neglecting other channels of thought, art, and literary expression. Over the course of time this selective activity definitely "Christianized" and "clericalized" culture and supplied the church with a virtual monopoly of the content and orientation of cultural development which became a distinguishing feature of Western European civilization for many centuries.

Between 600 and 750 the world about which Gregory the Great was so apprehensive had found a new orientation. The Roman heritage had been divided into three portions: Byzantine, Moslem, and Western European, each containing vital new forces that could not be contained within the old framework, itself badly weakened by internal ills. The new forces were so effervescent that by 750 the fate of historical development was by no means decided, although a direction had been established. The vast changes, however, had not eradicated the old Graeco-Roman tradition, for imbedded in each of the new civilizations was a residue of classical institutions and outlooks destined to supply vital nourishment to their future development.