The Development of Western Civilization

Narrative Essays in the History of Our Tradition from
Its Origins in Ancient Israel and Greece to the Present

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THE MEDIAEVAL CHURCH

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Cornell University Press
ITHACA, NEW YORK
The proposition that each generation must rewrite history is more widely quoted than practiced. In the field of college texts on western civilization, the conventional accounts have been revised, and sources and supplementary materials have been developed; but it is too long a time since the basic narrative has been rewritten to meet the rapidly changing needs of new college generations. In the mid-twentieth century such an account must be brief, well written, and based on unquestioned scholarship and must assume almost no previous historical knowledge on the part of the reader. It must provide a coherent analysis of the development of western civilization and its basic values. It must, in short, constitute a systematic introduction to the collective memory of that tradition which we are being asked to defend. This series of narrative essays was undertaken in an effort to provide such a text for an introductory history survey course and is being published in the present form in the belief that the requirements of that one course reflected a need that is coming to be widely recognized.

Now that the classic languages, the Bible, the great historical novels, even most non-American history, have dropped
out of the normal college preparatory program, it is imperative that a text in the history of European civilization be fully self-explanatory. This means not only that it must begin at the beginning, with the origins of our civilization in ancient Israel and Greece, but that it must introduce every name or event that takes an integral place in the account and ruthlessly delete all others no matter how firmly imbedded in historical protocol. Only thus simplified and complete will the narrative present a sufficiently clear outline of those major trends and developments that have led from the beginning of our recorded time to the most pressing of our current problems. This simplification, however, need not involve intellectual dilution or evasion. On the contrary, it can effectively raise rather than lower the level of presentation. It is on this assumption that the present series has been based, and each contributor has been urged to write for a mature and literate audience. It is hoped, therefore, that the essays may also prove profitable and rewarding to readers outside the college classroom.

The plan of the first part of the series is to sketch, in related essays, the narrative of our history from its origins to the eve of the French Revolution; each is to be written by a recognized scholar and is designed to serve as the basic reading for one week in a semester course. The developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be covered in a succeeding series which will provide the same quantity of reading material for each week of the second semester. This scale of presentation has been adopted in the conviction that any understanding of the central problem of the preservation of the integrity and dignity of the individual
human being depends first on an examination of the origins of our tradition in the politics and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the religion of the ancient Hebrews and then on a relatively more detailed knowledge of its recent development within our industrial urban society.

The decision to devote equal space to twenty-five centuries and to a century and a half was based on analogy with the human memory. Those events most remote tend to be remembered in least detail but often with a sense of clarity and perspective that is absent in more recent and more crowded recollections. If the roots of our tradition must be identified, their relation to the present must be carefully developed. The nearer the narrative approaches contemporary times, the more difficult and complicated this becomes. Recent experience must be worked over more carefully and in more detail if it is to contribute effectively to an understanding of the contemporary world.

It may be objected that the series attempts too much. The attempt is being made, however, on the assumption that any historical development should be susceptible of meaningful treatment on any scale and in the realization that a very large proportion of today's college students do not have more time to invest in this part of their education. The practical alternative appears to lie between some attempt to create a new brief account of the history of our tradition and the abandonment of any serious effort to communicate the essence of that tradition to all but a handful of our students. It is the conviction of everyone contributing to this series that the second alternative must not be accepted by default.
In a series covering such a vast sweep of time, few scholars would find themselves thoroughly at home in the fields covered by more than one or two of the essays. This means, in practice, that almost every essay should be written by a different author. In spite of apparent drawbacks, this procedure promises real advantages. Each contributor will be in a position to set higher standards of accuracy and insight in an essay encompassing a major portion of the field of his life's work than could ordinarily be expected in surveys of some ten or twenty centuries. The inevitable discontinuity of style and interpretation could be modified by editorial coordination; but it was felt that some discontinuity was in itself desirable. No illusion is more easily acquired by the student in an elementary course, or is more prejudicial to the efficacy of such a course, than that a single smoothly articulated text represents the very substance of history itself. If the shift from author to author, week by week, raises difficulties for the beginning student, they are difficulties that will not so much impede his progress as contribute to his growth.

In this essay, *The Mediaeval Church*, Mr. Marshall W. Baldwin presents his subject not merely as a political organization immersed in a struggle for temporal power, but rather as an all-pervasive aspect of mediaeval life itself. The papacy was no more the church than the empire was feudalism. The church was Christendom, and Christendom was the totality of European society. It was a way of life which had for its first purpose the worship of God and after that the salvation and civilization of man. Its members were the inhabitants of western Europe led and comforted by their parish priests, ruled and—according to chance—abused or protected by
their lords and bishops, who all together glimpsed only occasionally and from afar the passing might and splendor of emperors and popes. It is this church which Professor Baldwin has described with a skill and accuracy grounded in historical discipline and with a sympathy and understanding derived from religious faith.

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Ithaca, New York
August, 1953
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Introduction

The mediaeval Christian church embraced in its membership virtually all inhabitants of Europe. The occasional Jews, Moslems, and dissenters, or heretics, who appeared and reappeared were the only exceptions. Europe was, therefore, Christendom. Its society was formed by religion to an extent never equaled in any other epoch of its history; and as a result, an inextricable association of things religious and secular developed. From this interweaving of the ecclesiastical with the political arose the tendency of modern historians to overemphasize what might be called the external history of the church, its manifold dealings with secular states. Although such developments are an essential part of the fabric of European history, they do not constitute the most important element in the mission and therefore the history of the church.

Briefly stated, the church's primary purpose, its *raison d'être*, embodies two fundamental things, each closely related to the other. First, there is the solemn public worship of God, the homage which man owes his Creator. It is for this reason that monks renounce the world for a life of prayer. It is to this end that the church has elaborated what is called the liturgy. Liturgy is a word of Greek derivation
meaning service and signifies the order of prayer and ceremony which constitutes Christian worship.

A second objective, actually inseparable from the first, is the sanctification of individual souls, a continuous process whereby men grow spiritually in a manner different from, but analogous to, physical growth. Thus, mediaeval theologians who did so much to establish and define the terminology of Christianity spoke of man’s supernatural life, the life of the soul above the natural life of the body.

Especially important in this spiritual growth and the salvation of souls were certain specific ceremonies called sacraments. Mediaeval theologians also did much to clarify the church’s teaching concerning the sacraments and to give them explicit definition. The accepted number came to be seven: baptism, the Eucharist or, as it was popularly called, the Mass, penance, confirmation, holy orders, marriage, and extreme unction. These will be discussed more fully in later pages.

To sum up, the church taught that each human person was destined for an eternal life after death and that he might accomplish much during his earthly existence to prepare himself for heaven by nourishing his supernatural life. He must acknowledge his Creator in worship and accept the means offered for his sanctification. Should he of his own free will fall from grace, he could expect punishment, temporary in a state called purgatory if he were penitent, permanent if he finally rejected his Creator.

In addition to these initial reflections on the church’s mission, the student may profitably consider what the mediaeval church was not. Above all, it was not an institution dedicated primarily to the cause of social reform. It was interested in individual souls. Society mattered only insofar as it aided
or impeded individual sanctification. If society were to be changed or improved, this could be done only by changing or improving the individuals who composed it. The church, therefore, did not condemn feudalism or serfdom, although it did oppose excesses. If it endeavored to follow its Founder's precepts in protecting the weak, the sick, and the poor, it was also solicitous for the souls of the wealthy and the strong. Moreover, the action of the church on society varied tremendously with conditions and with individuals. Some ecclesiastics were exceptionally active in promoting what would today be termed charitable enterprises. Others were neglectful or apathetic. Both groups, however, would have regarded such activities as secondary in importance, their spiritual value measured by the extent to which they were dedicated to God.

The historian cannot, therefore, relate the purely secular history of the church without allowing fundamental matters to escape him. He may judge a temporal kingdom by the manner in which it promotes the welfare of its subjects. But spiritual welfare is not merely difficult; it is all but impossible to appraise by normal historical evidence and methods. Accordingly, in describing the many controversies between churchmen and statesmen which fill the pages of mediaeval history, he must remember that such terms as "triumph" and "decline" can easily be misleading. A pope may emerge "victorious" from an altercation with an emperor and the church gain no spiritual strength, just as a political defeat could be a spiritual triumph.

By the year 900 the familiar ecclesiastical organization of priests and bishops under the headship of the bishop of Rome had extended its jurisdiction over a fairly large area of western Europe and had begun to push eastward and south-
ward beyond the frontiers of the old Carolingian empire. Monasticism was now an accepted and widespread form of religious life. And a regular clergy, as the monks were called, had been added to the ordinary or secular clergy of parish and town.

During the tenth century Christianity in eastern Europe, the area of Byzantine influence, also expanded as territory was recovered from the Moslems or as the faith was carried to Balkan and Slavic peoples. Relations between Rome and Constantinople had been strained in the ninth century, but no permanent rift had developed and the entire church remained united under the pope. Only certain heretical groups of oriental Christians were actually separated. Yet it remains true that Byzantine ecclesiastical history, like Byzantine political history, unfolded under conditions markedly different from those which affected the West. It is, therefore, to the West that we shall turn first, later resuming the story of the relations between eastern and western Christianity.