



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Week #1b: Background to the Reformation: The Later Middle Ages and Renaissance Humanism

The Medieval Period—Dates and Extent

The medieval period is generally defined as running from 500-1500 A.D. Further subdivisions are sometimes made and various dates are given for distinguishing between the early middle ages and the later middle ages, although this distinction is not really helpful.

The Medieval Economy

Medieval society was predominantly agrarian, i.e. based principally upon agriculture and animal husbandry; throughout much of the middle ages, the percentage of the total population that lived in the towns was probably no more than 10%. Some of the crops grown that were grown are less familiar today, being crops that were coarser (e.g., kale) and less nutritious but able to grow in poorer soil (e.g., barley and buckwheat). (Remember that tomatoes, potatoes and corn were introduced from the New World in the early modern period and that many of the spices we take for granted today had to be imported from Asia and were not generally available in Europe during the Middle Ages).

Medieval Society: Feudalism and the Socio-Economic Obligations It Entailed

After the breakup of the Roman Empire and the chaos and destruction caused by the barbarian invasions of the fourth to sixth centuries and the Viking incursions of the ninth and early tenth centuries, it was necessary to order society fairly rigidly if some form of civilization was to survive. The result was feudalism, a system in which villagers (both serfs and freemen) lived on land belonging to local lords, to whom they owed certain obligations (a portion of produce and a certain amount of required, unpaid labor [*corvée*] for construction and repair of roads, dykes, buildings, irrigation canals, etc. on the lord's land). The local lord, who lived near the village in a large manorial house or fortified castle, provided for the defense and stability of the community and himself owed certain obligations to higher nobility who held sway over larger tracts of land and commanded a larger military force.

Medieval Religion: The Parish Priest

The local lord had the responsibility to see that the villagers were provided with a church and that provision was made for a priest. The parish priest was typically the son of a peasant and related to the local peasantry who were his parishioners. Standards for admission to the priesthood were low. For example, there was no guarantee that the priest

understood or could pronounce correctly the words of the Latin Mass that he celebrated at the church. Furthermore, although celibacy was officially required and holiness of life was held forth as an ideal, it was common for priests to take a mistress (who was publicly recognized as such) and fail to carry out their liturgical duties (=leading worship services, celebrating the Mass) due to chronic drunkenness, negligence or ongoing disputes with the villagers over the latter's failure to provide adequate support for the priest.

Medieval Religion: The Sacramental System

The reception of the sacraments was closely related to stages of life and this provided a basic institutional frame for Christian existence:

Baptism (birth) → Confirmation (puberty) → Confession (recognition of sin and adult responsibility) → Marriage OR
Choice of a Religious Vocation (Holy Orders) → Extreme Unction
(preparing for death)

At the same time, many people went to confession and received communion only very infrequently.

- Increased attempts in the later Middle Ages to get laypeople to go to confession (in 1215, it was required that one go to confession at least once a year).

In spite of limited participation, the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper underwent a number of significant developments:

- Since the time of Gregory the Great in the early sixth century, an increasingly developed account of the Mass as a sacrifice (re-presenting Christ's sacrifice as an offering supremely pleasing to the Father and thus a meritorious action)
- In the later middle ages, the systematic development of the doctrine of transubstantiation (particularly by Aquinas).
 - Transubstantiation=the complete conversion of the substance of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ (even if the outward appearances of bread and wine should remain).

Medieval Religion: The Cult of the Saints and Religious Pilgrimage

Besides the priest's celebration of the Mass and performance of other sacramental functions, religious concerns also received public attention in devotion to the local saint or saints, whose relics were interred underneath the altar of the cathedral or in an independent shrine. Some of these became centers of pilgrimage, attracting persons in need from other areas. What pilgrimage and the fascination with relics of local saints had in common was the search for a local mediator and a power that the person in need could access.

Medieval Religion: Monasteries as Centers of Spiritual Renewal

The quest for spiritual perfection largely passed to the monasteries, although they also were under pressure from the feudal society (being obliged to receive younger sons of the nobility who would inherit nothing under the system of primogeniture or women whose families did not wish to contract marriages for them). There were a number of monastic reforms, attempting to return monastic establishments to revised form of the

monastic rule that had been originally established by Benedict of Nursia; these reform movements would include the tenth century reform at Cluny, the reform at Citeaux (1098) and that associated with Francis of Assisi (1182-1226).

[12th-early 13th c. as height of church's ability to exert influence over civil government]

A number of new religious orders developed, including the Dominicans (of whom Thomas Aquinas is perhaps the best known). There were also a variety of less formal and less officially authorized movements in which laypeople took up aspects of the monastic life. Besides potentially unorthodox movements like the Beguines, this also included the Brethren of the Common Life, who emerged in the Low Countries (Netherlands and Belgium) in response to the preaching of Gerard Groote (1340-1384). (The best known example of the Brethren's "modern devotion" [*devotio moderna*] was Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*).

The End of the Middle Ages: Social and Economic Changes and the Rise of the Renaissance

Certain changes could be noticed by the fifteenth century.

- A new affluence had emerged with the development of the three-field pattern of crop rotation and the growth of the towns as centers of commerce.
- The devastating outbreaks of the Black Death (bubonic plague) had disrupted the society to such an extent that there was some room for social innovation.
- Furthermore, the rise of independent city-states meant that there could be a form of civil government that acted as a constraint upon the power of the religious hierarchy and helped to break the power of the old feudal lords.

With increased affluence, wider trade became possible.

- Since the mercantile city-states had gained a certain amount of autonomy from traditional authorities, this allowed new ideas to be received and promoted.
- In Italy, for example, many Greek exiles arrived with the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and this stimulated new interest in classical civilization and culture and in Greek philosophy.
 - Certain persons influenced by these trends argued that a renewal of learned culture was needed along lines different from the traditional scholastic theology.
 - This rebirth (*renaissance*) would occur when there was a return to the sources (*ad fontes*) of Western culture through an intensive study of Greek and Roman authors of the classical period.
 - This would lead to renewal of literature, philosophy and civic/political culture and a liberation from the constraints and relative poverty of the authoritarian ecclesiastical and political culture of the Middle Ages.

This renewal helped provide a concrete and independent for the emerging city-states and also provide some resources with which the dictates of the Catholic hierarchy could eventually be challenged.

- Since the Byzantine exiles had brought Greek manuscripts of the New Testament to Italy with them, Renaissance scholars who had learned Greek could access the

text of the New Testament in its original language, allowing for a new tradition of biblical interpretation to develop independently of the medieval interpreters who had depended upon Jerome's Vulgate (which had become the authorized and authoritative Latin version).