

## PART 4

# THE MODERN WORLD EMERGES

## Chapter Eleven

### TAKE OFF!

Around the year 1200 some areas of the life of early-stage Europe really started to move ahead, whilst many others remained much as they had been – and would do for centuries. The Gothic cathedrals, for instance, mentioned at the end of the last chapter, represent not only technological advance but a radical shift in the artistic conception of such symbolic buildings by their architects. By contrast, though, a basic element of medieval life such as instinctively resorting to the use of magic or astrology continued largely unaltered and essentially unchallenged until the Reformation.

To the extent that new technology produced – above all – increasingly impressive church buildings, it reinforced rather than undermined people's existing worldview. Cyril Mango, in a chapter on 'The invisible World of Good and Evil' in his *Byzantium: The Empire of the New Rome*, outlines that worldview:

... to all men of the Middle Ages the supernatural existed in a very real and familiar sense. Not only did that other world continually impinge upon everyday life; it also constituted that higher and timeless reality to which earthly existence was but a brief prelude.<sup>1</sup>

Like me, you may feel pulled back into such an age, to some degree, and touched by its outlook and worldview, when you visit an old cathedral or monastery – if you ever have the opportunity to do such a thing. Our worldview today, and the spirit of our own sceptical scientific and consumerist age, are so barren that perhaps it isn't surprising if we feel a little wistful not to have been – even to be? – part of that 'age of faith'.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1994; London; Phoenix (Orion Books) [or 1980, Weidenfeld and Nicholson]; ISBN 1 85799 130 3; p151.

## Progress

As you'd expect, progress was for a long time a part of people's experience long before anyone began seriously to reflect on the idea. It used to be thought that the ancient Greeks believed in the very opposite of progress: that there had been in the distant past a Golden Age, and that humankind had fallen a long way since then. This did indeed constitute a powerful element in the way they saw life. Even so, the Greeks shared the normal human hopes of a better future, and could see perfectly well that improvements were occurring over time. In the case of the philosopher Plato, although he recognised that the human race had made scientific, cultural, and political progress over the generations, the old myth overrode this as he assessed the difficult times in which he lived. What he believed he observed in the society of his own day was a decline into a less civilised form of life – which was why his teacher Socrates (the best of men) had been persecuted. Conflicting perspectives like this must have been common, and those who held them tended to political conservatism. More generally, the Greek worldview, because it gave the highest value to what was eternal and unchanging, could only with difficulty entertain the idea that history was going somewhere.

It was Christianity, when it came, which reinforced the Jewish understanding that there's a beginning and an end to the human story, so allowing the concept of progress to develop in the West. But for most of the Middle Ages, before Europe started to prosper, the idea was never going to be convincing. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, though, civilisation began observably to move forward – however much disaster might still always be just around the corner. The concept of 'progress' would, during the Enlightenment, come to capture Europe's imagination. And, by now, it's become one of the more unhelpful assumptions underpinning our Western mindset – despite Post-Modernism – and (sadly) one

of the 'acceptable heresies'<sup>2</sup> in today's Church. (I say this not because there isn't any truth or importance in the notion of 'progress', but because it's rarely put into the context of the rest of the biblical revelation.)

## **The friars**

The choice of the friars as the right place to begin an account of Europe's advance might seem a strange one. But it would be hard to overestimate the contribution of the orders of friars to Europe's development. The Augustinian canons, who weren't actually friars but were part of a new form of monastic-type life, have already come up for mention. So have the Dominican friars – in relation to the suppression of the Cathar heresy. Still to be introduced are the Franciscan friars.

THE ORDER OF PREACHERS    Dominic – at this time an Augustinian canon – noticed on his first visit to the Languedoc the utter inappropriateness of the pomp and splendour of the Cistercian abbots sent there at the same time. It struck him as undermining everything they'd been sent there to achieve. If they were to succeed, Dominic believed, they'd need to adopt the simpler, more 'apostolic' way of life that had been part of the original vision of the Augustinians – but that Augustinians had rather left behind. This value now became a passion for him, and he sought to give it institutional expression until his death in 1221. For a while he had only limited success, but by 1217 he'd gathered a small team of preachers around him. These he called together to his base in Toulouse, to commission them: four were to go to Spain, and seven to Paris; four would stay in Toulouse; and he himself would travel to Rome. 'They had no resources, little learning, almost no books; but something of the world-wide scale of later operations was already envisaged in the wide scattering of the little band. Also, the high proportion sent to Paris shows an immediate appreciation of the role

---

<sup>2</sup> By 'heresy' here I mean ideas strongly held but incompatible with the overall teaching of Scripture.

which the universities were to play in the recruitment and development of the new Order.<sup>3</sup>

The Dominicans' primary aim was the combating of heresy through preaching. Their focus shifted away from ministry in the Languedoc. It was to the intellectual powerhouses of Europe, Paris and Bologna above all, that they were drawn. If heresy is about wrong ideas, at least part of the answer to it needs to be an intellectual one. Surprisingly, perhaps, the work of the most famous of all Dominicans, Thomas Aquinas, involved much more the positive promotion of truth in teaching apologetics<sup>4</sup> and systematic theology than the negative refuting of ideas unacceptable to Catholicism.

**THE FRANCISCANS** St Francis of Assisi was a very different character from Dominic. The son of an affluent cloth merchant, at the age of twenty he became dissatisfied with his worldly life and heard the Lord's call. This followed his being taken captive in a local border dispute and, after he'd been released, succumbing to serious illness. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church gives this account of his life:

On a pilgrimage to Rome he was moved by compassion for the beggars in front of St Peter's and, exchanging his clothes with one of them, spent a day himself begging for charity. This experience of being penniless deeply affected him; he discovered both the joys and hardships of poverty; and on his return to Assisi, after being disowned by his father, devoted himself to ministering to lepers and employing his time in repairing the ruined church of St Damiano. One morning around 1208, while worshipping in the church of the Portiuncula some two miles below Assisi, he heard the Lord's words read, bidding his disciples to leave all (Mt 10:7-19), and at once understood them as a personal call<sup>5</sup>. He discarded his staff and shoes, put on a long

---

<sup>3</sup> R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, p280.

<sup>4</sup> In his case the reasoned defence of Catholic beliefs. (Evangelical apologetics, by contrast, would be the reasoned defence of what evangelicals believe the Bible to teach).

<sup>5</sup> Compare this with Anthony's call to life as a hermit (beginning of ch. 9). If Anthony was called to embrace poverty and withdraw from the world to wage spiritual warfare, Francis heard the call likewise to embrace poverty, but in his case to go out into the world to preach.

dark garment girded with a cord and set out to save souls. Before long he gathered around him a little band of like-minded followers.

Francis now drew up a simple rule of life for himself and his associates based on sayings of the Gospels, and on a visit to Rome in 1209-10 secured approval for it from Pope Innocent III. On his return he spent some time ... in the neighbourhood of Assisi, and from now on his associates ... rapidly increased and went on ever wider missions. In 1212 his ideals were accepted by St Clare, a noble lady of Assisi, who founded a similar society for women centred at the church of St Damiano. In 1214-15 Francis made his way through the south of France and Spain with a view to converting the Moors, but illness prevented him from reaching Africa. ... At the Chapter at Assisi at Pentecost 1217 the Order was organised by provinces, with ministers appointed to supervise them. In 1219 he made a preaching tour with eleven companions to Eastern Europe and Egypt; he was present at the siege and capture of Damietta [a 'victory' in the Fifth Crusade, although in effect a disaster because of what happened afterwards – Francis simply wanted an opportunity peacefully to share the gospel with the Muslim leaders on the other side].

During this absence in the East, Francis's personal relationship with the Order underwent a great change. Its direction passed into the hands of other friars ... and Francis, realising that he lacked the qualities for supervising and administering what had now become a vast enterprise, never sought to resume the leadership.

Ironically, it was the research into the early Franciscan movement of the liberal French Calvinist (and hence Protestant) minister Auguste Sabatier of Strasbourg in the later 1800s which led to the renewed interest in St Francis in the modern era. Francis, it seems, has been an inspiration to Christians of a wide range of convictions.

For Dominic, poverty was primarily a help in communicating with people. For Francis, though, it was a key value. The Rule of St Benedict had *obedience* as its distinguishing mark. Francis, though, wanted his people to live out nothing less than the life of Christ, in total surrender: a life of giving to the poor and preaching. When success came to the Franciscans, as it did astonishingly quickly, the practical challenges split the movement. The 'Spirituals' wanted to keep strictly to Francis's original principles. The more pragmatic of the Franciscans wanted a workable system for life and ministry – in particular, permission to have proper

accommodation to use. At times during the later 1200s the disagreement became quite violent. Eventually, after the matter was debated before him from 1310 to 1312, Pope John XXII decided for the reformers.

Part of the reason for the Franciscans' success was their imitation of the excellent organisational methods of the Dominicans, despite the orders' different values and ethos. One thing this meant for them was following the Dominicans into the universities. And they showed no less aptitude for the academic life:

At Oxford in the early fourteenth century there were ninety Dominicans and eighty-four Franciscans. The two Orders were running neck-and-neck, and together they must have accounted for well over a tenth of the academic population. More important, they had invaded and rejuvenated the study of theology, and profoundly affected every other branch of [academic] activity. The friars were able to do this because they provided larger opportunities to study than any other organisation, but also because they gave a new purpose to academic effort. Until the friars came the universities had served mainly as a training ground for administrators. They produced the men who developed the legal systems ... and the organisation of government. This was a necessary but unsatisfying aim. By contrast the friars in their studies aimed at the conversion of the world.<sup>6</sup>

The Dominicans were from the earliest days an Order organised for theological study. Already by 1223 there were a hundred and twenty members of the order in Paris; and by 1234 nine out of fifteen doctors of divinity in the university were probably Dominicans. ... [The] rapid organisation of Dominican studies to provide what was a separate university system parallel with the system of secular universities is one of the most astonishing creations of the Middle Ages. In some ways the Dominicans created a stronger organisation for advanced studies than any other ever created in Western Europe. There has never again been an organisation, directed by a single legislative authority, drawing together an international body of students studying for a clearly defined purpose.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> R.W. Southern, p298. By 'the world' here is meant 'the whole world'. There's an implicit challenge to us, the Western Christian community in the 21st century, to respond to our own situation in some appropriate parallel way.

<sup>7</sup> pp296-7

The Dominicans, for their part, owed much of their success in urban ministry to adopting the Franciscan attitude to poverty – i.e. turning it from a means to an end into a basic value. ‘In a large sense the Dominicans provided the intellect and the Franciscans the instincts which led to universal success.’<sup>8</sup> When it came to the growth of the respective orders, though, ‘the Dominicans with their more clearly-defined objectives were never as successful as the Franciscans. By the early fourteenth century the total number of Dominican houses was about six hundred as against fourteen hundred Franciscan houses’ [implying some 28,000 Franciscans in total compared with 12,000 or so Dominicans].<sup>9</sup> ‘Wherever there was a town there were friars; and without a town there were no friars’.<sup>10</sup> They kept themselves largely by begging. And although as they became a normal part of the scene life became easier for them, the friars generally managed – unlike the monks – to live the simplest of lives. (Friar Tuck in the Robin Hood story isn’t to be taken as typical).

### **Opportunities for, and the roles played by, women**

In Celtic double monasteries, where monks and nuns lived separately but met together as one community for worship, the person in charge could be a woman. If so, she would be high-born, and likely of royal blood. ‘Celtic attitudes to women seem to have been different to those which stemmed from either Rome or the Anglo-Saxons’, says John Finney. ‘... [S]ome have claimed that the Celts were the first “politically correct” peoples in the world. However, it can be noted that these “royal personages” had very great authority and wielded it vigorously. They did not hesitate to trespass on the normal preserves of the priesthood, and in the Celtic monasteries abbesses heard confessions and absolved the penitent. As

---

<sup>8</sup> p284  
<sup>9</sup> p285  
<sup>10</sup> p286

far as the Romans were concerned this was another of the detestable practices of the Celtic Church.’<sup>11</sup>

The renowned abbess Hild (St Hilda) presided over one of these double monasteries at Streanæshalch (on England’s north-east coast, and which the Danes named Whitby 200 years later). Born in 614, the daughter of an Anglo-Saxon father of royal blood, and a mother with Celtic ancestry, she was baptised at age 13 when King Edwin of Northumbria and all his court were baptised by the monk-bishop Paulinus<sup>12</sup> at York. After she became a nun in exile at age 33, the Celtic apostle Aidan asked her to come back to Northumbria to lead a small mixed monastic community at Hartlepool. Not only did she prove exceedingly competent, but she gave her allegiance to the Celtic version of Christianity. On moving to take charge at Whitby, the exceptional nature of her leadership gifts became apparent. Famed for her promotion of learning and culture, kings and ordinary folk sought her advice. Under her, the monastery was home to many gifted individuals – the most famous of them being the minstrel Cædmon. When the king wanted a decision taken as to which of the two versions of Christianity, Celtic or Roman, Northumbria should decide upon<sup>13</sup>, he chose Hild’s abbey as the venue for the debate. Although Hild argued strongly against Wilfred, the leader of the Roman party, he nevertheless managed to convince the king to support Rome. (Wilfred was rather a bully, as well as intellectually bright).

Etheldreda, born in 636, was the daughter of an Anglo-Saxon king from the south-east of England. Having been twice unwillingly married, but released from her marriage by her second husband, she established in around 673 a double monastery at Ely on land given to her by her first husband. Clearly women could establish double monasteries in fully Anglo-Saxon environments as well as Celtic

---

<sup>11</sup> *Recovering The Past: Celtic and Roman Mission*; 1996; London; Darton, Longman, and Todd; ISBN 0-232-52083-6; pp59-60.

<sup>12</sup> Paulinus had come to England with Augustine of Canterbury.

<sup>13</sup> In an age when spiritual power was still regarded as decisive – a state of affairs hard to imagine in our day – kings saw it as essential to intervene in spiritual matters. And, since unity was essential for any people if it was to prosper, the king would want spiritual unity for his kingdom. Unity was understood to imply uniformity of belief and practice.

ones. Indeed Ely became a highly influential monastery, its scriptorium producing manuscripts prized across Europe. And Ely's Gothic cathedral, part of the old monastery, is one of England's finest.

Of many – even most – female Christian leaders before modern times we know little or nothing; women haven't been the ones writing the history, and men have generally been content to ignore their contribution. In Romans 16:7 Paul mentions 'Andronicus and Junias' who 'are outstanding among the apostles'. Junias seems to be a woman's name here. She may or may not have been married to Andronicus – if the former, they were probably a husband-and-wife team. And what Junias's apostolic ministry involved we're not told. But if Junias really was female, Rom 16:7 is significant.

The story of a Pope Joan around 855, or alternatively 1100 – a woman in male disguise who, after a distinguished career as a scholar was elected pope – was widely believed in the Middle Ages but is now treated as no more than legend. Thereagain, it's significant if actually true – particularly for Catholics!

Until the monastic and church reforms at the beginning of the second millennium, few monks were either ordained either priest or deacon. Of course, nuns couldn't be ordained priest in any case. But, with the reforms, monks increasingly became priests. One result of this was the marginalising of women in religious communities, such that Europe's nunneries lost much of the power and intellectual importance they'd had until then. Abbesses of the most prestigious religious houses ceased to wear mitres on formal occasions like bishops or high-ranking abbots, as they had done.

Even so, the day of women's ministry wasn't over. The remarkable Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) can be seen as a transitional figure. In 1136 she became head of the community of Benedictine nuns she belonged to near Mainz. Hildegard kept up a correspondence with the most powerful men of her

generation, as well as many influential women. But it wasn't for her leadership qualities or intellectual ability that she became famous. Rather, it was the mystical visions she had – and recorded (in the *Scivias*) – that made her a celebrity. How orthodox her Christian belief was has been debated. And the divine guidance (she believed) she received led her into difficulty with those in authority – and its content makes one wonder what the spiritual source of some of it was. She didn't react well to stress. Conflict led to her retiring to her bed, sometimes for considerable spells. Some challenged her about only allowing noble women entry into her community, given that the Lord chose fishermen and the poor as his companions. She'd reply that the Lord had created a layered society with a higher and a lower order, and we shouldn't mix them up. On her preaching tours she often took the bishops and priests to task for their lax behaviour and, wherever she went, her message was always the same: repent and reform your life. It was her mystical and prophetic ministry which pointed to the way in which Christian women might make their mark in the centuries ahead (when the institutional Church was restricting their traditional role). Julian of Norwich (1342-c1416), St Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), and Madame Guyon (1648-1717) are some of the well-known names of female mystics. Since mysticism, by virtue of its spirituality, turned out to be preparing the way for the Reformation, female mystics from Hildegard onwards were involved, even if they didn't know it, in a potentially revolutionary activity (as were the many male mystics). To jump forward to our own times for a moment, in the Protestant church of the 1800s hymn writing was a highly influential means by which Christian women could – and did – express themselves, when most other ministry opportunities were denied them. In that century too, and up until the present, book writing has offered them a parallel opportunity. Especially in recent times, the ministry of prayer – again, beyond the effective control of the institution – has attracted large numbers of women<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> In this instance, though, it generated the problem that prayer came to be seen as what women do – and that men rather leave them to get on with.

No one quite knew what to do with unmarried women in the Middle Ages. 'Girls were commonly married at the age of thirteen or fourteen, and widows were expected to marry again without undue delay. It was only in this way that the obligation of family policy and the military responsibilities of property could be discharged. ... Great families felt bound to make provision for girls who could not or would not marry ... These considerations help to account for the very large number of monastic foundations for nuns in the early medieval centuries.'<sup>15</sup> But nunneries weren't just dumping grounds for unwanted females – as it might seem to us – because the life of prayer was seen as vital to the wellbeing of society. And by the later Middle Ages virginity was as highly prized as it ever would be. One powerful reason women chose to be nuns was the high value they placed on their virginity. Some became nuns because the prospect of marriage disgusted them. Yet others, who had been married, wanted to make amends for their past lives. Who knows what the disciplined life of prayer of this vast army of women in religious orders achieved?

In 1243 the Benedictine monk-chronicler Matthew Paris of St Albans recorded:

At this time and especially in Germany, certain people – men and women, but especially women – have adopted a religious profession, though it is a light one. They call themselves 'religious', and they take a vow of chastity and simplicity of life, though they do not follow the Rule of any saint, nor are they confined within a cloister. They have so multiplied within a short time that two thousand have been reported in Cologne and the neighbouring cities.

He added the additional information that 'they live a frugal life by the work of their own hands'. We know he was impressed because, when he summarised the main events of the preceding fifty years, he included this movement alongside the rise of the friars as a notable development in the religious life. These people were known as 'beguines' (suggesting heresy – the charge being that they were Albigensians), and were persecuted at the beginning. But these (mainly) women

---

<sup>15</sup> Southern, p309.

were just different; all they wanted was to live a simple 'religious' life in communities<sup>16</sup>, private houses, or singly (in the family home). Orthodox in (their Catholic) belief, they held to no distinctive theological ideas. The great bishop of Lincoln, Robert Grosseteste, a Franciscan, on one occasion told his fellow Franciscans that the highest form of the great virtue of poverty was not begging (like the friars) but to live by one's own labours 'like the beguines'. The growth of the beguines was explosive – as we saw happening with earlier monastic-type movements and organisations. Modern research has shown that the movement originated in Liège, spread to the other cities of Flanders (modern Belgium), and then migrated as far as the Baltic, Bohemia (Czech Republic), and the Alps.

Male resentment against them presented a problem. The Church, too, was less than happy to have in its midst a religious movement it couldn't control. Bishop Bruno of Olmütz in eastern Germany, writing to the Pope in 1273, fumed: 'I would have them married or forced into an approved Order'. The General Council of Lyon in 1274 began the official suppression of religious fringe-communities – which may well have included the beguines. But the General Council of Vienne in 1312 mentions them explicitly:

We have been told that certain kinds of women commonly called Beguines, afflicted by a kind of madness, discuss the Holy Trinity and the divine essence [what makes God what He is], and express opinions on matters of faith and sacraments contrary to the Catholic faith, deceiving many simple people. Since these people promise no obedience to anyone and do not renounce their property or profess an approved Rule, they are certainly not 'religious', although they wear a habit and are associated with such religious orders as they find congenial ... We have therefore decided that their way of life is to be permanently forbidden and altogether excluded from the Church of God.

The spirit of freedom, here, up against the old forces of control. Clearly these male church leaders lacked any prophetic insight into the new order of things that even then was coming into being.

---

<sup>16</sup> There is a beautifully-preserved cluster of Beguine houses in Bruges, Belgium.

## **Technological and scientific advance**

TECHNOLOGY We live in at a time when China is becoming a world power again. It's been estimated that, over the course of history, China has usually been responsible for between 25% and 50% of global economic output. China's humiliation until recent times has tended to mislead us about that nation's contribution to world history. Many key inventions, such as paper and gunpowder, came to us from China. They were brought along the Silk Route, along with silk, spices and other valuable goods. By comparison with China's technological development at the time we're considering Western Europe seemed utterly primitive. This, however, was just about to change.

The commitment to scholarship and education on the part of the Church – especially of the monasteries – was going to produce quite unexpected results, as well as some thoroughly predictable ones. The monasteries were concerned to be good stewards of whatever assets they controlled – and possessed the educated personnel and the disciplined form of life to make good use of them. They were on the verge of launching a technological revolution in Western Europe that would come to parallel Chinese achievements and, in due course, surpass them.

Monks had an interest in labour-saving devices. These allowed them to devote themselves to the life of prayer – the basic reason for living the monastic life – as well as to study, which was also important to them. The challenge was to come up with ingenious solutions. Water wheels could provide power for such activities as milling flour – but sophisticated mechanisms needed to be designed for the efficient harnessing of this power. If wood was the obvious material to use for most components, equipment could be much more serviceable if certain parts were manufactured from metal. The new importance of metal prompted the development of expertise in the smelting and working of metals such as iron. So,

for instance, the large Cistercian abbey at Rievaulx in the north of England produced around a ton<sup>17</sup> of iron per day at the height of its output.

The life of prayer itself encouraged technological advance. The monks had regular times of worship – worship around the clock, one might say. But there was no clock. The challenge was to produce clocks. The basic mechanisms, associated with water mills, were already in place. They simply needed development – mainly in terms of manufacturing precision and the exclusive use of metal. The use of clocks wouldn't be restricted to the monasteries, of course. They started to be placed on church buildings. Increasingly, accurate time came to invade people's lives. And eventually – although not until a later age – when factories had clocks, measured time would become a valuable commodity, and come to rule the workplace and the rest of life.

'Just as the mechanical clock revolutionised the way people organised their time,' say Sally and David Dugan, 'glass changed their perception of space and their outlook on the world. The story of how glass developed in the West but not in the East [China], has many parallels with the story of clockwork.'<sup>18</sup> Glass-blowing had been known since the first century BC. Window glass had been produced by the Romans. Interest in using glass revived in the Middle Ages, and people in northern Europe had particular reason to value it – especially during the winter season.

Before glass, houses were dark, dirty places. It is not hard to see why early civilisations flourished in the warm climate of the eastern Mediterranean. Eating, thinking, scholarship and trade could be conducted outside or in light open rooms. Glass windows transformed indoor life in northern Europe. If a workshop had glass windows, the working day could be longer and productivity could be improved during

---

<sup>17</sup> 1,000 kg

<sup>18</sup> *The Day the World Took Off*; 2000; London; Channel 4 Books / Macmillan; ISBN 0 7522 1870 0; p109. The Chinese emperors restricted technological advances to their own personal use – so ensuring, in effect, that the potential inherent in them couldn't be exploited.

cold weather. It meant backward countries with miserable climates like England and Holland could at last start catching up. It was a new era of indoor civilisation.<sup>19</sup>

The use of window-glass – where small pieces of glass were held together with lead, and sheets of this fitted into strong metal frameworks – was pioneered by cathedrals and abbey churches. Overall window size – either for pointed-arch-type or rose windows (circular) – could be breathtaking. More generally, church-building itself was changing. As we've seen, architectural improvements such as the ribbed vault, the pointed arch, and – although not used until later – the flying buttress allowed the construction of our Gothic cathedrals. Such buildings, as imposing as they were massive, invited elaborate decoration as well as yet further architectural advances. They served as a stimulus to ever-improving stained-glass technology and advanced clock-design, amongst a host of other developments.

Mention has already been made of the Cistercian order. In seeking to return to the simplicity of the Rule of St Benedict, the Cistercians required that monasteries should be self-supporting, and that all monks should devote part of each day to manual labour. This led to the order making agricultural improvements and innovations. All the Cistercians asked for, as they moved to new areas, was to be given land regarded by its owner as being of little use – located somewhere a distance away from habitation. They became expert at clearing forest and rough ground, and draining marshy land. Using the *plovum*, an iron plough needing to be drawn by oxen, which dated from Roman times but had been little used then or since that time, they were able to prepare the land for pasture and arable crops – and to much greater effect than was possible with the standard wooden ploughs of the time. They used the water mills they constructed for sawing wood as well as for grinding grain, washing wool, forging metal, crushing olives, supplying fresh water, and removing sewage. With the timber they sawed in industrial quantities, they built large wooden barns of advanced

---

<sup>19</sup> p113

design and construction – which, in turn, permitted agriculture on an industrial scale. ‘Agricultural cathedrals’ the Cistercians’ barns have been called. A new way of farming was developed around these new storage facilities: the ‘grange’<sup>20</sup> system. In this, clusters of mainly agricultural but also industrial buildings (farms, in effect) would be established at a distance from each monastery, surrounding it. These granges would be manned by illiterate lay brothers (assistants to the monastic community proper), who would return to the monastery each weekend. Of the many Cistercian monasteries that came into being, Cîteau, the mother house, became one of the foremost wine producers in France, Clairvaux was noted for breeding cattle, Waldsassen in Sweden developed a large fish hatchery, whilst Jervaux in northern England produced exceptionally fine horses. England’s Cistercian monasteries came to be the chief producers of wool in Europe – a commodity on which England’s future wealth would be based.

The Cistercians weren’t the only agricultural and industrial pioneers in the monastic world, and the monasteries weren’t the only agencies of technological and economic development at the time – but in many places it was they who enabled a new and better way of life. Overall, the agricultural revolution that occurred at this time has been judged as important in its historical impact as the ‘Industrial Revolution’ of the 1800s.

**SCIENCE** Generally in the modern world, mathematical research precedes scientific research, and scientific research precedes technological development. In the later Middle Ages, though, it was technological development that led the way. So, for example, only when the artistic and technical challenges involved in cathedral building reached a critical point did those overseeing their construction become architects, as such; and only then did geometrically-based design and the mathematical calculation of stresses in key parts of the structure begin to be employed in any systematic way. Here the inherited knowledge from classical

---

<sup>20</sup> The word ‘grange’ comes from the Latin for ‘granary’, *granarium*.

times (ancient Greece and Rome), coupled with what had been learnt from experience, served the enterprise reasonably well.

Not all inherited 'knowledge', though, turned out to be real knowledge. In scientific matters, Aristotle was regarded as the supreme authority, despite the fact that he'd actually been rather a poor scientist – more observer than experimenter. He'd relied too much on speculation and the opinions of others, too little on any respectable scientific method. Consequently his authoritative-but-misleading ideas presented a considerable stumbling block for science as well as for Christian faith and the life of society; as we shall see. Two examples of Aristotle's pseudo-science will serve to illustrate how unhelpful his conclusions could be (as well as underlining the limitations of the unaided human powers of observation). He taught that, in human and animal procreation, the female contributes nothing to the make-up of any offspring – the male seed alone, implanted in the female's womb, gives the foetus its characteristics. All the female does is to provide an appropriate environment for its growth. The second example concerns the 'spontaneous generation' of various organisms. Aristotle believed that creatures such as frogs, eels, and snails were formed spontaneously from the mud of ponds and rivers, without needing parents. These ideas were no worse than many others prevalent at the time. The main problem Aristotle presented was his almost unassailable reputation: whatever he'd said was what was going to be believed.

The respect accorded to ancient authorities was what really held back science – as incorrect ideas in themselves never could. There were two groups of people, however, whose need to engage with reality started to undermine reverence for the past: doctors and sailors. The former knew whether supposed remedies worked or not – and looked for new ones where they didn't. The latter found that ancient astronomy produced a less-than-ideal basis for accurate navigation by means of the heavenly bodies – and had to introduce tables of corrections to

cancel out the inaccuracies arising from using the classical model of the heavens.

In parallel with such learning from experience, two Franciscan academic philosophers helped propel scientific theory towards our modern understanding of it. Roger Bacon (c1214-1292/4), associated with the universities of both Paris and Oxford, was one of the first in the Latin West to lecture and comment on Aristotle's writings about subjects other than logic. After he came to know the work of the Oxford theologian Robert Grosseteste (mentioned above) on the natural sciences, he began strongly to promote the idea of scientific experimentation. William of Ockham (c1287-1347), who taught Aristotelian logic and physics, probably in Oxford and London, argued that, in seeking to understand anything, only the minimum number of factors possible should be brought into play. In other words: look for the simplest explanation. His principle is known as 'Ockham's Razor'. An example, relating to his times, might be: if neither angels nor demons are actually necessary to explain thunder and lightning, leave them out of the reckoning (and leave out anything else not strictly necessary to the explanation as well)<sup>21</sup>. The Razor allowed a lot of unhelpful 'baggage' to be removed from people's thinking about their world.

Eventually, learning by experience in combination with the development of scientific led to a scientific revolution – but not until after the Reformation. It isn't entirely surprising that both Bacon and Ockham fell foul of the church authorities. Not for a long time would the Church come to terms with the scientific enterprise. What might not have been suspected was that these two scholarly teachers of

---

<sup>21</sup> Of course, what's necessary in an explanation is 'a very good question'. Ex 9:23, e.g., tells us that 'When Moses stretched out his staff towards the sky, the LORD sent thunder and hail, and lightning flashed down to the ground.' Ockham's Razor leads to modern 'scientific' explanations – which all too easily remove God's involvement in what occurs in his world (as has happened). The challenge in an instance like this one is to see how the LORD's action and scientific explanation are both true, and don't conflict with one another.

Aristotle's work were actually fashioning instruments which would in due course completely undermine that philosopher's authority in the area of science<sup>22</sup>.

### **Civilising the barbarians**

When Christianised, the leaders of the Germanic tribes (such as the Franks and Saxons) continued to be little better than barbarous warlords. The question was: how to civilise them? How could the gospel be brought to bear on Germanic culture such that it might become more properly Christian?

It's thought that one reason Urban II had for the calling a Crusade was the Church's concern to turn the mindless violence of the petty warlords who constituted the aristocracy of the Germanic tribes into something more constructive – and so to tame them. This may well be true. If so, given the behaviour of the Crusaders, the attempt can only have been minimally successful. And yet, during the Crusading centuries, the concept of 'chivalry' appeared – a code of behaviour for knights (cavalry) and the privileged amongst the warrior class generally. This seems to have involved a Christianisation of the longstanding codes of the Germanic warrior class. Christendom feudalism, anyway, needed something of the sort to make the Middle Ages 'work'.

The respect accorded to women – especially wives – may have its roots in the role Germanic womenfolk played, accompanying their men to battle, and offering them spiritual insight and shouting encouragement. It came to be expected that, although they would need to be ferocious and efficient killers on the battlefield, the warrior class should live a dedicated Christian life in all other respects. They ought to adopt such values as faithfulness to their wives and honesty. If Crusading was simply the marrying of war with religion (holy war), chivalry proved to be something much more subtle. And it was paralleled by another

---

<sup>22</sup> Although not in a subject like logic.

development: courtly behaviour, the way things were done at the royal court. Here we get the concept of 'good manners'.

Now there was any amount of hypocrisy and worldliness in all this. But the fact remains that, overall, the public acceptance of such standards by itself changed behaviour in society for the better. And these standards were relevant to the way people actually lived. That the chivalrous attitudes towards women proved advantageous in the pursuit of romantic love, for instance, and that the idea of 'courtly love' could mask some quite sub-Christian behaviour between the sexes, didn't rob the new ways of behaving of all their value. 'Good manners' – in the sense of genuinely considerate behaviour – are worth coming across even in hypocrites.

### **The modern nation state**

There are various candidates for the honour of being the first modern nation state. The two with the best claim seem to be Switzerland, in the Later Middle Ages, and Holland, after the Reformation. Whatever the merits of each case, the story relating to the former is significant. 'Switzerland ... takes its name from the district of Schwyz on Lake Lucerne, one of three cantons that began to assert their separate political identity against the German Empire in the late thirteenth century. In 1291 Schwyz, Uri, and Unterwalden signed an "Everlasting League" of self-defence, swearing to assist each other against outside interference. ... In 1315, at the battle of Morgarten, a Habsburg [i.e. Imperial] army was routed, and the League became the nucleus for other disaffected districts. ... Another Habsburg defeat, at Sempach in 1386 ... established the cantons' practical independence.' And so it went on – more pressure from the Empire, leading to further expansion of the emerging Switzerland. 'Yet apart from the Compact of Stans (1481), which regulated the network of mutual alliances, there were no common institutions. Though the Empire recognised the League's existence by

the Treaty of 1499, there had been no formal declaration of independence. The Swiss had proved themselves the finest soldiers in Europe ...<sup>23</sup>

Holland's formation had strong similarities with this, but was ultimately a struggle for religious freedom (from Catholicism). Other nation states, by contrast, like France and England, gradually developed in a top-down way (from the monarch) and imperially. The nation state was becoming the basic political unit to which a people belonged – as is still the case. Current tensions over the centralising tendencies of the European Union are largely about the continuing importance – or otherwise – of its constituent nation states. But in the later Middle Ages the nation state was effectively a new idea.

### **Towns and countryside**

It still made a great difference whether a person lived in the countryside or in one of the towns. The countryside retained the old ways. To move into the town was to move away from the clerical and hierarchical ideals of life in the medieval world.

There is something about urban life which provokes dissent. The comparative stability and isolation of rural life does not encourage the expression of unauthorised opinions. One man who does not think as his neighbours [do] had better keep quiet. But when rebels and eccentrics come together in twenties and thirties instead of twos and threes, they find safety in numbers, they encourage each other to speak, and even men of quiet disposition begin to say what they think and to think strange thoughts. Moreover the discontents of town life are more acute than those of the countryside: the proximity of abject poverty and blatant wealth, the capriciousness of employment, the sense of exclusion, all add anguish to the common sufferings of life. There is plenty of evidence that all this was present in towns in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Articulate lay opinion about religion, often crude and generally subversive, began in the towns. This in turn stimulated preachers and organisers to give form and coherence to these opinions, and sometime to oppose and denounce

---

<sup>23</sup> Davies, *Europe*, p 404.

them. By the fourteenth century these movements were too strong to be repressed. They were the new feature in the religion of the later Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the towns were growing rapidly, and the population in rural areas was more-or-less static. It's been estimated that in Florence – an exceptional case, admittedly – the population grew from about 10,000 to 30,000 during the 1200s, and from 30,000 to about 120,000 between 1300 and 1345. But towns with populations of 50,000 or more were becoming common in the 1300s, especially in Flanders (Belgium), the Rhineland, and northern Italy. 'Economically and politically the urban communities of western Europe were more important than they had been since the fourth century.'<sup>25</sup>

Southern says something about the spirituality in towns that I'm not sure how far I agree with – but it's thought-provoking, and important if true (and would apply also to faith-systems other than Christianity):

Emotion is the leading characteristic of urban religion. It takes men out of the pressures of business, out of the perplexities of prices, wages and interest rates, out of the miseries of intermittent over-employment and unemployment, out of the conflicts of classes and guilds<sup>26</sup>, and it transports them into a world of the spirit where (as Eckhart<sup>27</sup> taught them) 'God begets his Son in the soul' and 'in this way, as some of the authorities say, the soul is made equal to God'.<sup>28</sup>

It's not difficult to see why Eckhart was considered somewhat heretical. Not difficult to see, either, that he's preparing the way for a more biblical form of the faith that experiences the heart being 'strangely warmed' (as John Wesley put it) – even for the challenge to 'invite Jesus into your life', with the expectation that something will happen, and go on happening. What Southern seems to be suggesting isn't merely an escapist spirituality to cope with the pressures of town life – more a profounder level of spiritual experience than can help individuals

---

<sup>24</sup> Southern, *Western Society and church in the Middle Ages*, pp 46-7.

<sup>25</sup> p46

<sup>26</sup> Or 'guilds' – the groups formed to cater for trade, social, and religious purposes.

<sup>27</sup> The teacher of a mystical form of Christianity.

<sup>28</sup> Southern, p 48.

prosper in a new, more pressurised world. Maybe the reason that fundamentalist Islam is acting the way it is reflects its inability to help those involved with it engage with modern life (i.e. it may 'work' in rural Pakistan, but it doesn't in the urban West).

The more Christianity became an urban phenomenon, the more Christians looked for an experiential, even mystical, spirituality; and found it. This served to make religious institutions seem relatively unimportant. What was the need now for a spiritual hierarchy and church discipline?

This tendency to view established institutions as irrelevant was all the more dangerous because it coincided with a changing attitude to politics. Here too the hierarchical structure which had been raised up with so much painful effort began to seem impracticable and probably wrong. Everyone could see that secular governments with no theoretical pretensions were growing in strength and independence, and this cast doubt on the relevance, and then of the validity, of elaborate theories of papal lordship, universal rule, and sacerdotal [priestly] supremacy. At the same time everyone could see a wide gap between papal actions and papal pretensions. In itself, this was only to be expected. But there began to be a widespread suspicion that the gap was growing, and that it was growing because the theory behind the pretensions was unsound.<sup>29</sup>

But there was another factor which, by undermining the Church's credibility, dealt an ultimately fatal blow to the old order of things.

### **Famine and plague**

In the years 1315-17 Europe north of Spain, but excluding northern Scotland, suffered severe winters and wet summers sufficiently serious to cause catastrophic famine. In some places things didn't improve until 1322. The wheat crop was reduced by an estimated 50% in France. The price of wheat in London was 500% higher than in pre-famine years. In Holland the price of fish rose by a

---

<sup>29</sup> p 48

similar percentage. Scarcity of animal feeds led to diseases that ravaged livestock. On the estates of the English monastery of Ramsey in 1319-20, the number of cattle fell from 166 to 17. In Flanders, the town of Ypres lost 10% of its population during the summer of 1316 alone. In 1316 three abbesses of Reinsburg in Friesland (northern Holland) died. And in what is now Belgium, also that year, six heads of religious houses died – and by 1319 a further eighteen had died. This has been described as ‘an almost universal crisis for the northern European Church.’ But worse was to come.

In human terms no other catastrophe in the Middle Ages can come close to matching the plague of 1347-50, known to history as the Black Death. Nature, not always benign, visited Western Europe with a tragedy of monumental proportions, leaving in its wake millions upon millions of humans dead. Economic historians debate the impact of the Black Death, at times in a clinical, almost detached way, but there can be no debating that the middle of the fourteenth century witnessed a phenomenon that caused pain, suffering and death to human beings, their numbers so large as to render numbering them almost impossible and their anguish so profound as to defy description.<sup>30</sup>

Four different consequences of the plague need to be mentioned:

1. The authority claimed by the Catholic Church rested ultimately on its claim to spiritual power – which showed itself in various kinds of ‘sacramental magic’. (I’m talking about perceptions here, as much as anything). But what the Black Death had showed up was the Church’s utter powerlessness in the face of radical evil: the Church’s leadership died like everyone else, and the clergy had no answer to the plague with which to protect the people. American writer Malcolm Gladwell has popularised the idea of a ‘tipping point’: when an idea, or whatever, reaches ‘critical mass’. The Black Death proved an initial tipping point for collapse in the belief in the Church’s spiritual power. If modern unbelief (in the Christian faith) in society goes back to something like the rise of the universities, the Black

---

<sup>30</sup> Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, p 276.

Death tipping point represents almost certainly another step-change towards unbelief.

2. 'Uncoordinated, violent attacks against Jews erupted in many places during the plague. Everywhere the charges were the same. The Jews had poisoned the wells of Christians. It was said that they themselves were taking water from distant streams, which was taken as a clear sign of their guilt'.<sup>31</sup> In Spain the Christians blamed especially the Muslims. Elsewhere, strangers, foreigners, pilgrims, and lepers (in particular) were targets of popular hostility. But nothing compared with what the Jews suffered. The first reported attacks against them were in 1348 in Narbonne and Carcassone in the south of France. By early 1349 Jews were being burned alive across Germany. 'Some responsible leaders acted with decency and humanity. The Pope, Clement VI, threw open the gates of Avignon to Jews fleeing these outrages. He called on Christians everywhere to act with tolerance and threatened with excommunication those who persecuted the Jews. The king of Aragon, Pedro IV ... ordered swift prosecution of the perpetrators there and protection of Jews everywhere in his kingdom'. And so on. 'Neither popes nor kings nor civic leaders were able to stop the fury: it ended only with the passing of the plague.'<sup>32</sup> It's worth pointing out here the cost of Christendom's Christian unconvertedness, which didn't (couldn't) deal with people's fear of plague: the 'perfect love that casts out fear' (1 Jn 4:18) was far from being any part of the experience of most 'Christians'. The religion they were inducted into didn't lead to the bulk of Catholics 'having their minds renewed' (Rom 12:2), and their hearts changed (Ezek 36:26): what we have recorded for us, rather, are the vengeful acts of effective unbelievers. Loving one's enemies (Mt 5:44) was clearly not a value medieval Catholicism managed to inculcate. Not surprisingly, Christendom Christianity when put to the test all-too-regularly produced this kind of murderous result.

---

<sup>31</sup> p 284

<sup>32</sup> pp 284-5

3. The third consequence was a kind of community penance – in response to a plague widely interpreted as punishment for sin – which has been described as a manifestation of religious hysteria. Groups started to form and roam the countryside in Flanders (Belgium), and later in Germany. The Dominican friar who acted as spokesman for one group called his companions the Red Knights of Christ, because of their frequent sessions of flagellation in which large quantities of blood flowed. It was the most noble voluntary shedding of blood since Christ's crucifixion, he said, and it united these individuals with the shed blood of Christ. All of them would be saved. None of them needed a papal indulgence to reduce the time they needed to spend having their sins purged in 'purgatory'. And there was no need for them to honour the saints, because they carried on their own bodies and souls the wounds of Christ. Priests and friars started joining these 'flagellants' in significant numbers. The groups would swarm into church buildings, performing their own strange rituals, and disturbing the ordinary church services. No one could stop them. The junior clergy were afraid of them, the senior clergy didn't know what to make of it all. In addition to the blood-letting, the flagellants fasted and lived celibately. They sang hymns about Christ's sufferings as they went, and recited many Our Fathers and Hail Marys. As the scourgings were in progress, the groups chanted liturgies of penance. What was particularly disturbing, though, was that wherever they went they called for the killing of the Jews, whom they identified as the culprits behind the plague. When the plague came to an end, the movement dissolved away as quickly as it had begun. Persecution of the Jews, however, subsided more slowly. As with the rise of mysticism at that time, there were markers for the future here.
4. Last but not least, the Black Death gave rise to great social changes. Because there were now such labour shortages, something like a free market in labour emerged, breaking the old feudal bonds that held down the lower classes and forcing up wages. No longer, for instance, could the Cistercians rely on the lay brother system which allowed them to work

their own lands – now they had to put tenants on their farms. Feudalism would take a long time to die, but its back had been well and truly broken.

## **Purgatory**

The plague catapulted what was quite a long-standing Catholic belief into prominence, one which had been given prominence when in 1095 Pope Urban II had called the First Crusade – Crusading being reckoned a substitute for all other penances:

The stench of death and the sight of the reaper's scythe cutting down millions indiscriminately focused attention, as nothing else could, on the afterlife. When death comes, what is the end? Do the lights simply go out? The answer was that at this time there was an almost universal belief in the afterlife. In which case, what happens at death? With countless numbers of every age and condition dying from famine and plague, the question had a harsh relevance. Prayers and Masses<sup>33</sup> were said for the dead and alms [charity] given in their name, but why? By this time the geography of the afterlife was well-established in the belief system of Christians, and it included purgatory. There was heaven for the perfect, hell for the wicked and, in between, purgatory, where the not-so-perfect and the not-so-wicked could be purged of their guilt before entering heaven. It was a waiting room for paradise, and the wait there could be shortened by the prayers and good works of the living.

It would be nearly impossible to exaggerate the significance of purgatory in the life of the medieval Church, especially in the way that life was lived by individual Christians. The antechamber of heaven where the good but not perfect souls suffer their temporary punishment had a fixed place in the beliefs of virtually all Christians in the Western Church and deeply affected their religious practices. Apart from heretics like the Waldensians and the Cathars and, later, John Wyclif, purgatory was believed in as firmly as the Eucharist, the divinity of Christ, the Trinity and other central beliefs of the Church and played a role almost as large as the Eucharist and the Virgin in the daily devotional lives of people. That one could assist one's deceased father and mother and other loved ones and shorten their stay in purgatory led to the development of a rich variety of religious devotions and practices, from which, it is safe to say, no parish in Christendom was exempt ... Boniface VIII,

---

<sup>33</sup> Mass = the Catholic form of the Communion service. Also = Eucharist.

in calling the Holy Year of 1300, allowed a plenary indulgence [i.e. a full remission] of the penance due for sins not only to those who confessed contritely and visited the Roman basilicas but also to those who duly confessed their sins and died on the way to Rome ...<sup>34</sup>

This was no new belief. Because Augustine's *City of God* was so influential – second in popularity only to the Bible – and speaks about a purging fire which punishes some souls in the interval between death and the Last Judgement, the idea was well-known. But even he was only incorporating an existing idea into what was intended as a reasonably systematic account of Christianity. It was, ironically, the Augustinian monk Luther's complaint against the practice of selling indulgences that would trigger the Reformation, when the time came.

## **Travel**

Whatever it does for the individual, travel certainly broadened emerging Europe's mind. Crusading proved an eye-opener to all involved in it, exposing them, as it did, to a very different world. Amongst other things, it was understood as a pilgrimage. But for most Europeans, pilgrimages of a more conventional kind provided them with their travel opportunities: from London to St Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury, perhaps, as described by Geoffrey Chaucer; or to the shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostela, or to Rome, from all over Europe. The further people went, the more they experienced different places, peoples and cultures. And as increasingly they had the freedom and resources to do so, more and more people individuals embarked on pilgrimages.

The limited band of European scholars needed to move from one university to another, and so to travel, both to study and to teach. Members of religious orders – a rather larger number – were often required to journey elsewhere. And increasingly people were starting to travel because of the international trade opening up at this time – overland (often the most difficult), on inland waterways

---

<sup>34</sup> Logan, *The History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, pp 287-8.

and in coastal waters. The Hanseatic League, which began to form during the Crusades, controlled northern European trade down as far as Flanders. This was a trading network involving some 200 cities at one time or another and based in northern Germany, especially on the Baltic. In the Mediterranean, the northern Italian coastal republics of Genoa and Venice grew powerful on the trade in luxury goods from Asia and Asia Minor, made possible by their alliances with Constantinople. They dominated southern European trade up as far as Flanders. Both Christopher Columbus and John Cabot, who undertook pioneering voyages of exploration at the end of the 1400s were Genoese – one result of Genoa's tradition of seagoing trade. But it was the (thoroughly unreliable) travelogue of the Venetian Marco Polo (c1254-c1324) of his overland travels to China which first kindled Europe's interest in travel to faraway places. Europe was beginning to see the rest of the world in its imagination.

### **Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274)**

For all the Middle Ages until Aquinas, Augustine of Hippo had been the authoritative theologian – just as Aristotle had newly become the authoritative philosopher. Augustine's thought, as we've said, although intended to be biblical, was coloured much more than he or others realised by the philosophical amalgam that was Neo-Platonism and by the instincts and values of the Roman Empire. Augustine unintentionally tied (Catholic) Christian theology to Neo-Platonism. The Dominican scholar (and outstanding intellect of his day) Thomas Aquinas, however, intentionally reworked Catholic theology in the light of what Aristotle had taught. (We today would say 'in the light of newly discovered science' – because that was how Aristotle had impacted the generation in question<sup>35</sup>). Aquinas wasn't seeking to undermine Augustine – indeed he enthusiastically points out his agreements with him – but that was the inevitable consequence. Augustine's thought up to this point had enjoyed a virtual

---

<sup>35</sup> At this time what we would call 'science' was known as 'philosophy' – and, later on, would be known as 'natural philosophy'.

monopoly within the Western Church's theological tradition: there was nothing to rival it. But by producing a rival systematic theology of such sustained intellectual power and coherence, Aquinas broke that monopoly. And this helped open up the possibilities of theological debate – something that was vital if Western Christianity was to be renewed.

Some of Aquinas's early work was condemned as unorthodox, but the stigma didn't last, and his great work, the *Summa Theologica*, became the basis for modern Roman Catholic theology. Aquinas borrowed only very carefully from Aristotle – which doesn't mean, of course, that the Aristotle contribution was always helpful. He's usually associated with (notorious for?) the doctrine of transubstantiation – the idea that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ as the priest consecrates them in the Mass. Actually the doctrine had been defined before his time; he just provided an Aristotelian intellectual basis for explaining it. He deserves a better reputation amongst Protestants, even though we disagree with him at key points. For instance, his explanation of how religious language works is as helpful as it's masterly. He had the great gift of being able to express complex ideas in straightforward language – doubtless because of the thorough way he considered issues, and the clarity with which he thought them through.

Aquinas followed his teacher, Albert the Great, in seeing revelation as above reason, but consistent with reason. Reason, he believes, can show that there is a God. However, even this needs confirmation by revelation. But there are truths quite beyond reason's competence – such as the Trinity or Christ's Incarnation<sup>36</sup>; these can only be known by revelation, or not at all. Aquinas has been charged with presenting human reason as merely weak, as a result of the Fall, and not radically corrupted. How one assesses the charge will depend on one's own theological understanding – but it seems to be partly true and partly unjustified: reason is sometimes just weak, and sometimes corrupt, depending on what's

---

<sup>36</sup> God taking human flesh, that is.

being considered. He's also been charged with adopting a longstanding nature/grace scheme of seeing the world, so assisting the rise of secularism. 'Grace does not abolish nature,' he said, 'but perfects it.' What 'grace' does here is to restore the 'supernature' (the supernatural), lost at the Fall, to 'nature'.

But, on this understanding, only the Church's control can keep these two together. Once that control is lost (as historically it has been), off goes human reason on its own, and leaves revelation increasingly out of the picture. The Church is left trying to deal in 'supernature', whilst the rest of the world concerns itself with the non-supernatural order – in other words, all the practical issues of life (as they come to be seen): education, politics, science, and so on. The sphere allowed to the Church reduces to worship, narrow faith issues and morality. This indeed is what has happened. So the second charge should probably be allowed to stand. A different picture of creation from that offered by Aquinas is required.

### **The Roman way of thinking**

Before we look in the next chapter at how the angle of take-off steepened, an observation about medieval culture. It's been said that Latin is a precise language, ideal for bureaucrats. Perhaps this partly accounts for the over-precision of debatable doctrines in the Western Church. Anyway, the Latin cultural context to the learning of the Middle Ages was just about to be subjected to assault across a wide front – and found wanting. Maybe Post-Modernism is, in one aspect, the end-point of the retreat from unhelpful Latin and medieval ways of thinking.