

Religious and Moral State of the Middle Ages

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Introduction

The term Middle Ages began to be in common usage since the 17th century in order to mark the new era of national, political, cultural and religious life in the West following the migration of nations. In this context, this new age covers about four centuries known as early Middle Ages, from the Trullan Synod (692) up to the beginning of the Pontificate of Gregory VII and the High Middle Ages (1073-1294) begins at the turn of the eleventh century with Cluniac and Gregorian reforms, when Christian culture entered upon with true splendour that endured for 150 years. The boundaries of Medieval Christendom began to increasingly expand in the beginning of sixth century after the mass conversion of Lombardians, Franks, Visigoths and Saxons. The seventh and eighth centuries were tinted by conversion of the Germanic and Slavic tribes. Prior to their conversion, they were all pagans, uncultured but vital, without any universal perspectives but guaranteed in future that they dominated the scene in the Catholic Church without being under Roman Empire.

The early Middle Ages were said to be a period of transition and became the principal theatre of many activities. The Greek and Roman world was no longer essential but the Germanic-Romanic states were quickly taking shape in Central and Western Europe. Together with the development of the

Roman papacy and the Latin theology of Augustine, the third key element without which the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages would have been inconceivable was the Germanic peoples. That the conversion of the Germans to Christianity and their assimilation into the Catholic Church took about a long period of eight hundred years. Roman organization, Christian ethics and German proficiency created the medieval state. In this context, our major concern about public morality in the Middle Ages would mean a lot more factors such as wide-ranging culture, mode of life, faith and practices, customs and conventions etc. which were under constant change in varied time and place.

Church Becomes Germanic

The fresh conversion of the tribes in the Middle Ages took place in a manner quite dissimilar to that of the early Christians of the first centuries. Without any external force, the early Christians voluntarily embraced Christian religion with deeper conviction that always had an inner force to stick on to the truth of Christianity, whereas in the medieval period it was not so. Germanic, Slavic and other tribes were incorporated into an expanding Christendom when their kings or Chieftains received baptism. In countless events, those new converts did not seem to fully understand and experience the Christian substance since their membership to the Church chiefly depended on loyalty to their political leaders or material advantage, or sometimes on pressure. The conversions continued in this way; towards the end of eighth century Charlemagne used the force to the conversion of the Saxons as later the Scandinavian kings were very influential to the conversion of the people of Denmark, Norway and Sweden in the first part of the eleventh century.

All those conversions therefore did not make any progress in Christianity. The individuals simply received baptism or went through some external Christian ceremonies without forgoing their age-old heathen concepts and practices. It was a great task in front of the Christian missionaries to

establish a true Christian morality and form a Christian conscience. The Church as well the state fought against all heathen customs of religious nature and offered the antedates of Christian essentials, yet the people could not come away from their rooted culture. Their Christian life and faith were only at the preaching level of the missionaries, but in reality they stuck on to their own superstitious practices such as charms, magic, sortilege, witches, etc. Their crude beliefs and practices upon heathen gods and goddesses influenced far and wide the other sects that affected the moral rhythm of the society. In short, the Germanic spirit was not tuned in the beginning to the aspirations of the Church.

People, moreover, attached particular importance to various forms of worship like consecrations and devotions that the Church instructed them in public and private life. The ordinary folk were still ignorant of distinguishing the Christian practice from the older Germanic traditions. This ancient Germanic civilization undoubtedly influenced and coloured their faith in One God. Consequently in sacraments, sacramental devotion to saints and veneration of relics the old superstitions sneaked in. Crass ignorance or duplicity is seen in their worship of either national or local patron saint, a thinly disguised heathen God in every vestige of ancient heathen custom. The Church did not dare to eliminate their old belief systems fearing such removal would face tough resistance, so by accommodating it gradually built its stronghold upon them with utmost caution. The approaches therefore were systematically carried out. The Germanic laws in a more modified form were progressively incorporated into canon law, as a result of it Germanic ritual of funeral offerings under the influence of Christianity transformed into the form of pious foundations in favour of the Church and poor.

The Collapse of Morals

The continual wars with its own confusions shattered the political stability of the age and certainly made a negative impact on the social

cohesion. The different tribes like Vandals, Alans and Suevi entered the Roman Empire along with Burgundians, West Goths, Alamanni and Franks and attacked the Roman state. They broke up the highly developed infrastructure, road systems, bridges and aqueducts into heavy ruin. It was an unprecedented economic, social and cultural obliteration causing huge loss and the depopulation of the cities. Rome, the renowned world city with sometimes more than a million inhabitants, it was alleged, was reduced to the level of a small city with only twenty thousand inhabitants. The ancient civilization was completely at its collapse. Robbery, cruelty, gross sensuality and blood revenge were at the broad front. Huge cities in Germany became Frankish while northern France fell into the hands of Balkans. Many sees were vacant without bishops for almost a century. In different times, varied groups emerged to plunder and ruin monasteries and churches. It was not only the desolation of property but also massacre and enslavement in various parts of Europe for long periods at a stretch. An obvious decline of religion and of clerical discipline was its due at least in part to the devastation caused by this second wave of barbarian invaders of Europe. In all these unprecedented events, there was a Christianizing of the German world as Germanizing of Christian world.

Coming to the Eastern part, in the 7th century, an absolute rival of Christianity began its unforeseen conquering course namely Islam. For Christianity, its expansion meant a catastrophe on a striking scale. Christianity in this period vanished almost completely in North Africa excepting Egyptian Copts. The renowned churches of Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine went under. The patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem sank into insignificance except the Western one. The eastern lands such as Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa in which Christianity originated have been lost.

Slavery as a social institution continued to exist in the early Middle Ages. Illegal trade in slaves especially the prisoners of war was in full practice. Catholic Church to a great extent struggled to ameliorate the situation of

slaves and in this regard it made some understanding that many slaves were taken as serfs or bondsmen under her protection. The act of violence was counter balanced by insisting on the right of haven for churches and cemeteries, a right that had been recognized in Christian antiquity, and thus it restrained the wild and bloody fights.

Women were always an intriguing question. Monastic and clerical writers often assumed an attitude of disdain towards women throughout the Middle Ages even though the Church took effort to uphold the dignity and rights of women. Abortion, exposure, infanticide, and other crimes against family and women were unrelenting in several parts. The Church never ceased to insist upon the significance of the sacramental character of the marriage especially its unity and indissolubility but sadly, in marriage the infidelity was not infrequent and indissolubility was a mockery.

Morality of the Clergy

Religious and moral life of the people was profoundly influenced by the conduct of the clergy and incidentally the picture varies with time and place. Only the secular priest who belonged to the lower rungs of the society were shepherding the parishes. His chief responsibility was sharing the works of the bishop of administering the sacraments much the same as today; celebrating the holy mass, particularly on Sundays, baptizing, hearing confession, anointing the sick and burying the dead.

The morality of the clergy in France and Italy were appalling during the troubled and warlike periods. Clerical concubines were apparently rampant, and there always seemed to be a plentiful supply of bastard children of priests. A historian notes that on one particular day—chosen at random—the curia issued 614 dispensations for marital impediments, 484 of which had to do with the bastards of priests. A great difficulty was met in enforcing the law of celibacy which obliged all clerics to abstain from marriage after receiving sub-deaconship. St. Boniface, Charlemagne and Saxon Rulers increasingly worked out to enhance the moral standard of the clergy. It was

not the same case always. Some rulers did not also cooperate with the efforts taken by the Church; in Spain the Visigoth king Witizia (700–710) formally abolished the law of celibacy. In other places, though enforced, it was opportunely transgressed both by the clergy and the bishops themselves. The marriage of priests in Lombardia was defended as a liberty of the Ambrosian Church. Restoring the law of celibacy was one of the main objectives of Gregorian reformers in the later Middle Ages and they had only a little success in it. Several illegal marriages were declared null and void in the Second Lateran Council (1139) with much difficulty but of course it did not yield the enduring result.

In order to improve the moral standard of the clergy, the Church introduced *vita canonica* one of the fruit bearing remedies but in course of time such implementation too began to disappear. However, the desire and stern efforts to straighten the path of the Church did not vanish. St. Daustan (960-988) Archbishop of Canterbury in England was involved in a vigorous campaign for the reform of ecclesiastical discipline. He enforced and revived the *vita canonica* among the secular clergy to monasteries and convents. Shortly after the Daustan's death his efforts were reversed by the devastating invasion of the Danes and the conditions were as bad as before.

Along with that line, a powerful reform movement composed of some clergy emerged and battled against those evils as to bring forth a healthy atmosphere in the religious and ecclesiastical life. Under the pontificate of Clement II the papal see launched with full vigour the enforcement of the canons. It severely warned against the incontinency of the clergy. The practice of Simony, the marriage of the clergy and lay investiture were branded as the adverse heresies which were to be tackled. One of the most talented and outspoken cardinals of the age by name Cardinal Humbert fully exercised his authority to bring down all these evils under control.

Feudalism

The history of the Church particularly for two centuries (850 - 1050) was dominated by the laity and of lay interests. In the reign of Charlemagne all bishoprics and a large number of monasteries with properties were under the control of the emperor. When the Empire splintered into smaller units each sovereign claimed to inherit the Carolingian rights, and lay-control of ecclesiastics was treated as any other fief or feudal lord with rights and obligations dictated by custom. Sometimes a noble might confiscate church property outright and entirely turn it to his own use. Without any exception, the situation engulfed all parish churches as well papacy itself. Many reasons could be said; the breakup of the Carolingian empire, the devastating raids of a new group of barbarian invaders of Europe and undoubtedly the irreparable decadence in the administrative machinery of the Church. The Church got entangled with the clutches of feudalistic lords. The secular lords striving to obtain and increase their political power eyed the lands of the church. Not only had the material goods of the church but also the bishops and abbots fallen into the hands of the aristocratic feudal princes. As long as the bishop or abbot fulfilled his feudal obligations to his lord, the lay lord would not disturb his vassal. In some cases, the bishops and abbots themselves headed the church property and became the feudal lords as well secular rulers in their own privilege.

Dramatic Liturgy

In the early church, the original character of the mass – the basic sacrificial meal structure – was fully active and the participation of the laity was meaningfully alive. The officiating priest was not in the limelight but one among the participants. Such essential element was quickly vanishing in the Middle Ages. In the mass the separation of laity from the altar was vividly evident, a sharp distinction developed from that of the early centuries. Now, in every sacramental celebration, the priests took upper hand and people were slowly excluded from all participations making the mass exclusively

the priests' business, with the people reduced to the role of mere spectators. The altar was quite distanced from the faithful and with such distance the people got estranged from the active participation of the mass. The dress code of the priest with heavily embroidered chasuble became well distinct in contrast to the early church where the priest used to put on the ordinary dress. Further, the language used in the liturgy was not any more intelligible but only creating a sense of boredom. That the laity used to bring bread from their respective home in the early church for consecration was not any longer in practice. The consecrated bread or communion to the faithful was designed in coin like form which was to be received by the kneeling posture not in their hands as they once used to do in the early community's celebration, thus declining the original character in the Middle Ages.

The original spirit of the mass and the community participation were blot out by the mysterious, awesome and transcendental nature of the mass. It became a kind of spectacle that people watched. The various dramatic action of a priest was no longer understandable in their context as mystical and allegorical significance were affixed to it. The Gloria, reading of the gospel and praying in the garden of Gethsemane were typically enacted with historical costumes rousing more amusement rather than evoking a sense of piety. New meanings to the actions of a priest were attached; to signify the five wounds the priest made 5 times the sign of the cross over the chalice and host, and kneeling down in the mass to signify Christ death and standing up again to his resurrection.

The laity did not regularly frequent communion as monks, nuns and priests used to, and were uninterested in the participation of full mass but for them all that mattered was to somehow glimpse the consecrated bread in the mass, and the climax was to see the elevation of the bread after consecration. A caution bell rang in order to alert the faithful before the elevation. People used to run from one church to the other only to watch such elevation. The priest was paid with more stipends just to keep holding

the host up higher and longer and some even engaged in fight among them to get the best place for viewing the host. The *Corpus Christi* procession was fixed to be held in June and during the feast, the whole town thronged to the celebration in which the priest draped in a heavy embroidered chasuble carried the sparkling gold monstrance in the streets of the town.

Morality of the Laity

Catholic morality essentially had been the morality of the confessional ever since the Middle Ages. People thronged to the confessionals standing in a long queue waiting to report their sins without limitation. This practice of private confession emerged from the Celtic monastic church which amazingly spread over throughout Europe. Public penance which was the remarkable characteristic of the early church gradually replaced with the new type of auricular confession. In the early church, the act of penance was never administered more than once to the same person; if a sinner relapsed, he could not have any recourse rather was left totally to the mercy of God. The penitents who performed their penances were sacramentally reconciled with the Church on Holy Thursday as a rule before the bishop. They fell prostrate in front of the bishop who lifted them holding their hands signifying their restoration to full communion with the Church. This act of absolution was the perfect sacramental communion with the Church. Now, in auricular confession any ordained priest could give absolution instead of the bishop. It is to be noted that during the reign of Charlemagne, the private confession was in full swing that no one could legitimately receive the Eucharist without making private confession, and understandably the reception of Eucharist became very rare.

Penances for sins were meticulously set and the priests carried the penitential books to the confessionals. The Irish saints Patrick and Columban purported to have set the level of punishments for the sins. It undoubtedly did not come from Rome. Sometimes the punishments to sins are serious and severe. People without satisfaction repeated the confession. In course

of time particularly after 9th century acts of penances were given special importance and rich people increasingly replaced penances by payments of money and obviously it paved the way to social injustice and countless abuses.

Sexual immorality was widespread beginning with an ordinary man to people with the highest position. Charlemagne himself had numerous concubines and even ecclesiastical higher officials were not exceptional. Therefore, in the penitential books attention was paid more above all to sexual sins. It is to be underlined that the concept of original sin expounded by St. Augustine had a very negative impact upon the understanding by the common folk about sexuality. Original sin was transferred by the sexual pleasure of the marital act. Sex was considered something bad and abominable and severity in sexual morality broke through on a broad front. Even married people were required of sexual continence. Women's menstruation and blood in giving birth and male semen caused ritual impurity and debarred those from reception of sacraments. The married people were asked to forego the marital intercourse on certain prescribed days such as on Sundays and solemn feast days with their vigils and octaves, on Fridays and in Advent and Lent. Strict restriction of marital act in a way created imaginative ideas leading to widespread archaic, magical notions.

The Role of the Bishop

The Bishop had the varied responsibilities in administrative, judicial and spiritual realm; one of his prime duties was to make visitation to the religious institutions in his diocese. At his visitation, he used to ask the neighbouring clergy of the region as well the lay people to attend, and he examined the credentials of the clergy and their behaviour, administration of the sacraments, moral life, clerical dress, etc. The laity also had to vouch for their conduct.

The Bishop besides had an authority to hold the synods of clergy during which he laid down the law on the great variety of matters subject to his jurisdiction. One of those which caused of lay resentment was his

ecclesiastical court where he exercised jurisdiction on a wide range of matters, including moral behavior, marriage, last testaments, etc. His obligation was to find suitable persons to be ordained to priesthood. As there were no seminaries for training a priest – only in the council of Trent the importance of having a seminary in the respective diocese was insisted – the selection of the candidate was informal. The candidates who wished to become a priest came forward three days before the ordination ceremony and appeared for oral exam. In that exam, if they were able to express their firm grasp of catholic faith in a simple language they were admitted to ordination with the condition those candidates should have completed the canonical age i.e. twenty-four years and were not disqualified by reason of servile birth, illegitimacy or bodily defects.

Monastic Reform

After the fall of Carolingian empire numerous monasteries fell into decadence. The revival was the felt-need of the time. A movement of reform began at the monastery of Cluny in Burgundy, where a series of strong abbots restored the strict observance of the rule of St. Benedict of Subiaco who provided a model of reform spreading to numerous other monasteries in the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, England and in Germany. Gregory VII, an outstanding Pope and an ascetic encouraged monasticism all throughout his life. He made St. Benedict the model abbot and father of monks. The Benedictine Order combined the old monastic traditions such as remaining in one place; obedience to the abbot; the renouncing of material goods and marriage, a manual work and copying manuscripts, both antique and Christian.

Nevertheless, before the rise of Cluny, there was no such thing as a monastic “order”, because each monastery was self governing yet being under local bishop or Pope. The Cluny Order launched a new concept of grouping together in a religious “order” under the one authority of the abbot of Cluny. Its growth was enormous, and by 11th century they had twenty thousand abbots, priories, and cells. In the history of the church, the Cluny

Order played a key role in contributing medieval spirituality to its vast conglomeration of members. Historians vouch that it was an outstanding champion of the papal dominion in the medieval time and was certainly the chief spiritual power behind the Gregorian reform and its fight for the autonomy of the Church from the clutches of the laity. Some brilliant Popes were namely Gregory VII, Urban II, and Paschal II from the Order of Cluny.

Medieval Piety

Throughout medieval period, in spite of confounding confusions, the Christian substance was certainly preserved. Christianized Germanic people, like other tribes believed the essentials of Christian substance such as one God, and his Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit but at the same time several transformations gradually took place.

The meaningful adult baptism of the early church was turned into a passive, unconscious baptism of infants. Early church's liturgy which was an active liturgy that people participated as one communion was transformed into a liturgy of one-man, an ordained priest whose language was incomprehensible to the people. People going to tomb in the cemetery in order to venerate the martyrs in the early church appeared to a massive veneration of saints and relics. The Germanic superstitions superseded the highly reflective theology beyond than the eye could see, especially the intense belief in spirits which was to be found in all ethnic religions. Undue importance was given to celibacy to both religious orders and secular clergy which was unheard of Eastern Church.

Gregory the Great (590 -604), the last of the Latin Church Fathers and at the same time the first medieval Pope was a simple and austere person that he was more liked and widely spoken by many. Gregory, the wise ascetic from a rich aristocratic family and lovable pastor of souls was certainly responsible for the theological sanctioning of a vast veneration of saints, relics, ideas of purgatory and of masses for souls. His "*Dialogue on*

the life and miracles of the Italian Fathers" was responsible for the diffusion of crude stories of miracles, visions, angels and demons. The good pope unfortunately paid too much attention to sacrifices, penitential ordinances, categories of sin and punishments, and put undue emphasis on fear of the eternal judgement and hope for reward for good works. What the church witnesses today his people is nothing but the logical continuation of the ideas bequeathed by the pope Gregory the Great.

Gregory the Great recognized the innovative powers of Germanic peoples and extended his sphere of action northward and westward particularly France, Spain and Britain. The English historian Edward Gibbon is said to have remarked that Caesar used six legions to conquer Britain but Gregory with only forty monks. It was Gregory who a man of great wisdom laid the foundations for the spiritual and cultural unity of Europe.

Whatever it is, medieval piety had increasingly formed with prayers and sacraments that the people took it to the zenith. Liturgy was conducted not only on Sundays but also on feast days. It is worth noting that the early medieval developments such as liturgy, auricular confession, priest celibacy, monastic life, veneration of relics, piety, etc. were increasingly shaped and developed in the Middle Ages.

Conclusion

Even though many imperfections and short comings, on the whole the Middle Ages present us many alluring facets. The important work of the Church during the Middle Ages was to take up the ministry of evangelization and education of the German peoples. Though it needed a longer period, this work was a historical achievement and definitely above all it determined the course of the subsequent history. The German tribes for the first time came together as one unit by Christian faith and that paved the way for the idea of a community of nations. Besides, in the Middle Ages certain fascinating qualities hardly ever equaled such as deep rooted faith, a consciousness of

sin and a willingness to do penance, an amazing spirit of sacrifice as a charity etc. The Church has been called "the great educator of the Middle Ages". A great quantity of noble and holy men and women in secular life, of outstanding Bishops and priests, of devout and educated monks and nuns were the successful fruits of the Church enterprise. With unflinching efforts the Church was able to produce more brilliant results, and this age was a period of preparation and transition with full of sharp contrasts to the succeeding history of the Church. It is appropriate to conclude with the words G. Steinhausen, a renowned historian that in the Middle Ages Church was the first and most important medium of culture.