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Richard E. Sullivan

ABOUT THREE HUNDRED YEARS ago a German scholar named Celluarius, undoubtedly following suggestions made by earlier historians, wrote that in his opinion it would be useful and fitting to designate the period in Western European history lying roughly between the reign of Constantine (died 337 A.D.) and the fall of Constantinople (1453) as a "middle age," lying between an "ancient" age and the "modern" era. His terminology was almost universally adopted and has persisted with amazing vigor, so that today the terms "Middle Ages" and "medieval" are standard in historical scholarship and in the vocabulary of educated people. In spite of this universality of usage, there are few terms whose meaning is less precise and is more complicated by connotative accretions. It may serve a good purpose to ask whether there can be any precise meaning for these terms and to seek what those who study the period offer by way of elucidation.¹

I

The chief source of difficulty involved in contemporary use of "Middle Ages" springs from the fact that the term connotes a series of value judgments all of which recent scholarship has shown to be of dubious value. Since their first employment, "Middle Ages" and "medieval" have repeatedly been used by intellectuals to distinguish and set apart an era

¹ The most comprehensive discussion in English of the problem considered in this paper is Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948). This volume supplies an especially good bibliography which will show the wide interest recently seen in reevaluating the nature of the Middle Ages and the place of the medieval period in the total stream of history.

of the past that they believed to have been different from and inferior to that in which they lived. Therefore, "medieval" and "Middle Ages" have almost always had a condemnatory, derogatory connotation. As each passing generation made its judgment of the Middle Ages in terms of placing that period in belittling contrast to its own scale of values, there gradually accumulated a broad range of meanings for "medieval," all of which taken together obliterated a precise and useful meaning for the term. Although there were always defenders of the Middle Ages, their efforts were seldom strong enough to offset the cumulative effect of the harsher judgments of the Middle Ages.

The first step toward a clarification must concentrate on identifying the ingredients which have combined to create the present usage, colored as it is by a tone of scorn and deprecation. In reviewing the evolution of the concept "medieval" or "Middle Ages," it appears that these terms represent a congeries of ideas gleaned from the values governing six major intellectual movements: Renaissance humanism, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the political revolutions of the late 18th and 19th centuries, Darwinism and the associated cult of progress, and the materialistic social scientism of the past century.

The European humanists, especially the Italians, of the 14th and 15th centuries were the first to judge the long period between the fall of Rome and their own day as one inferior both to their own era and to the classical age. Their grounds for condemning the Middle Ages derived primarily from their convictions about what made good literature. Although during its early stages the Italian Renaissance produced a brilliant literature in the native Italian language in the works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, the later humanists, especially in the 15th century, became absorbed in recapturing "lost" classical masterpieces, publishing them, and producing a literature in Latin and Greek in imitation of the classics. Under

the spell of classical influence, they found all literature that was not classical in style, language, and content to be repulsive and barbarous. Even a sampling of medieval Latin literature convinced them that that age was truly one of ignorance. It was evident that medieval writers played fast and loose with the rules of grammar and syntax, when judged by classical standards. No less uncouth in the sight of the humanists were the uses to which medieval authors had put the precious languages of antiquity. Would Vergil, Horace, or Cicero have condescended to debase the Latin language by writing religious hymns, monastic chronicles, manuals on alchemy, business documents, and hair splitting theological tracts? How could any age that failed to produce majestic epics, polished odes, and urbane orations be judged a civilized one? Some of the humanists were further disturbed by the fact that a considerable body of medieval literature had been composed in vernacular languages which obviously were the bastard offspring of a forced union between pure Latin and brutish barbarian tongues. That the vulgar tongues would be permitted to replace Latin and Greek was to the Renaissance humanist evidence enough of the barbarity of medieval men. Even so skillful an employer of the vernacular as Petrarch, whose writings helped develop the Italian language, was always prouder of his Latin works written in imitation of classical models than he was of his fine lyrical poetry in the Tuscan language. This powerful sympathy felt by the humanists for the classical world colored and shaped their interpretations of history. Repeatedly 15th- and 16th-century Italian historians wrote of the political tragedy resulting from the fall of Rome and of the cultural darkness that settled over Europe after the 4th and 5th centuries, when classical literary and artistic styles were smothered before the onslaught of barbarism. These same sentiments were not unknown in Northern Europe by the 16th century. Who cannot feel Erasmus's scorn for the Middle Ages in his barbed assaults

on scholastic philosophers and clergymen in his *Praise of Folly*? Thus the humanists created a concept of a “Middle Age,” consisting of all those unrefined, vulgarian centuries during which men lost the ability to employ the classical languages in the classical style.

The humanists received valuable support in their scornful estimation of the Middle Ages from those caught up in the vast intellectual and emotional disturbances that accompanied the religious revolution of the 16th century. In large part the Reformation consisted of a protest against the religious evolution of Western European society between the institution of Christianity and the Reformation. The major Reformation leaders, sensitized by their awareness that the Roman Catholic church of the 15th and early 16th centuries was incapable of supplying full spiritual satisfaction, found their explanation in a special interpretation of history. They argued that at an early date in Christian history—certainly no later than the 3rd century—there had begun what Foxe called the “miserable ruin and desolation of the Church of Christ.”² Through the long centuries of the Middle Ages, error was compounded upon error by popes, monks, theologians, and canon lawyers, until a religious monstrosity—Roman Catholicism—was created. A typical expression of this reading of the history of Christianity emerges clearly in Luther’s early pamphlets, such as “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” or “The Freedom of the Christian Man.” The strongly condemnatory language of these tracts set the tone for the early Protestant evaluations of the religious developments of the Middle Ages. Calvin spoke no less concisely on the depth of religious perversion in the Middle Ages. Since man’s departure from God’s commands had occurred in a definite time and space, it followed that to a devout Protestant all those centuries during which the original Christian message had been polluted by

² *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, 4th edition, revised and corrected by Josiah Pratt (London, n.d.), IV, 250.

the actions of misguided or evil men were centuries filled with ignorance and sin. Every event and every development of medieval society was suspected of being tainted by the same kind of error which bred Roman Catholicism. Cotton Mather, writing in 1701, summed up the Protestant interpretation of the Middle Ages by saying: "Incredible Darkness was upon the Western parts of *Europe*, two hundred years ago: learning was wholly swallowed up in barbarity."³ The fulminations of Protestant leaders wrote indelibly into the mind of Western European society a portrait of the Middle Ages as an era of wickedness, defiance of God, and the perversion of the truth; that era deserved only the scorn of those who had once again found religious truth.

The Enlightenment of the 18th century added new justification for sentencing the Middle Ages to obloquy. This vigorous intellectual movement marked an attempt to synthesize the scientific discoveries of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries into a cosmology which pictured the universe as a perfect machine created by a Divine Mind and operating automatically according to invariable laws. These laws, holding the innermost secrets of the universe, were accessible to those who would employ their reason to search for them. Rationalism thereby became the key to human endeavor for the disciples of the Enlightenment. Mysticism, emotion, sentiment, faith in the unknown—all were condemned as deterrents to rational thought and thus barriers in the way of discerning the truth about the world order.

This whole movement found sure grounds for magnifying itself by contrasting its convictions with the irrational, superstitious ideas and practices of medieval men. The early scientists worked in an atmosphere that bred hostility to the Middle Ages because their efforts met sharp opposition from the Roman Catholic Church, an institution which was ob-

³ Quoted by Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1939), p. 97.

viously the chief remnant of medievalism surviving in Western Europe. The career of Galileo stands as a dramatic reminder of that hostility. Copernicus, who was not a tendentious man, reflected this sense of divergence between his age and one past in one of his letters: "If perchance there should be foolish speakers who, together with those ignorant of all mathematics, will take it upon themselves to decide concerning these things [i.e., the matters dealt with in his *De Revolutionibus*], and because of some place in the Scriptures wickedly distorted to their purpose, should dare assail this work, they are of no importance to me, to such an extent do I despise their judgment as rash."⁴ The philosophers of the Enlightenment of the 18th century deepened that hostility by condemning the medieval trust in revelation, holding that God the Master Engineer would hardly be guilty of dribbling out the truth through the process of speaking in person to creatures of this earth. The matter of miracles was disposed of by David Hume in his *Essay on Miracles*; his withering assault made to appear senseless and laughable the medieval belief that the operation of nature could be set aside by direct intervention of God; the height of irrationality was to expect miracles in a universe that operated according to immutable law. Thus at one stroke almost the whole range of medieval belief was relegated to the realm of pure fancy, completely at odds with the demonstrated nature of the universe. Those who held such views were judged guilty of ignorance of the most abominable sort. Before they had finished their characterization of the Middle Ages, the disciples of Enlightenment had created an image of that era which centered around the charges of ignorance and superstition. The exponents of this idea were legion. Voltaire unquestionably set the tone for other *philosophes*. In his highly significant *Essay on the*

⁴ Quoted from E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, revised edition (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1954), p. 51.

Manners and the Spirit of Nations, he advocated the study of the Middle Ages because "it is necessary to know the history of that age only to scorn it."⁵ Other widely read historians, such as Condorcet, David Hume, and William Robertson filled in the details to bear out this judgment. Edward Gibbon did perhaps the most thorough and most articulate job of expressing the Enlightenment aversion to the Middle Ages. In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, centered around the theme of the victory of barbarism and religion over glorious Rome, one finds nothing but scorn for the horrors of the Middle Ages as contrasted with the glories of antiquity and the hopes of the future. Coupled with the accusations of barbarity levelled by the humanists and of wanton sinfulness hurled by the Reformation leaders, this new version of the Middle Ages nearly sealed the verdict against the Middle Ages.

However, events yet to come in Western Europe's ideological climate drove the antipathy toward medieval society even deeper into the European mind. The political fury unleashed by the French Revolution bred further condemnation of medievalism. As a "popular movement," the French Revolution and its successor revolutions elsewhere were directed against the *ancien régime*. To the devotees of the revolutionary movement, the old order was primarily signified by aristocratic and clerical privilege so tenaciously fastened on society as to restrict the rights and to prejudice the interests of all other groups. It was not difficult to trace the privileges of nobles and priests back to the Middle Ages; as a matter of fact, the nobility and clergy were proud to demonstrate such origin of their precious privileges. It was only logical that the revolutionists would picture the Middle Ages as the era which gave birth to a vicious, unenlightened, oppressive political and social order. Holbach asked the question that typified the revolutionary contempt for the Middle Ages: "Titles, super-

⁵ *Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1817), IV, 510.

annuated parchments kept in gothic chateaux, do they bestow upon those who have inherited them the right to aspire to the most distinguished offices in the Church, in the court, in the judiciary of the army, without the talents necessary to fulfill them worthily?"⁶ Hume wrote that for the English "an acquaintance with the ancient periods of their government is chiefly *useful*, by instructing them to cherish their present constitution, from a comparison or contrast with those distant times."⁷ Even the usually mild Thomas Jefferson could not refrain from a harsh judgment of medieval society: "History, I believe, furnished no example of a priest-ridden people maintaining a free civil government. This marks the lowest grade of ignorance, of which their civil as well as religious leaders will always avail themselves for their own purposes."⁸ When the revolutionary spirit of the French Revolution burgeoned into the mass political movements of the late 19th and 20th centuries, the concept of medieval political ineptitude and backwardness was instilled into the mass mind. Perhaps the awakening masses did not know much history, but they were sure that the Middle Ages witnessed the nadir of political wisdom, especially when measured against Athenian democracy or Roman benevolent monarchy or their own constitutionalism. Perhaps Jules Michelet best represented the 19th-century democratic rejection of medieval society.

Still another derogatory picture of the Middle Ages emerged out of the buoyant spirit of progress that caught up the Western European mind in the 19th century. Founded on Darwin's dramatic demonstration that the vital process shaping the

⁶ Baron Paul d'Holbach, *Ethocratie ou le Gouvernement fondé sur la morale* (Amsterdam, 1776), pp. 43-44; quoted in Frank E. Manuel, *The Age of Reason* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1951), pp. 64-65.

⁷ David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (London, 1848), II, 482.

⁸ Letter to Baron von Humboldt, December 6, 1813, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York and London, 1892-1899), IX, 430.

universe was evolutionary progress from the lesser to the greater, from the worse to the better, and promoted by the tremendous increase in the material wealth of Western European society, the cult of progress insisted that the course of human history had been ever upward and onward, that the present was indeed the best of all possible ages. The disciples of progress delighted in holding the Middle Ages up as the age of infancy in European life, marked by simplicity, crudity, and naïveté. Especially when judged against the material affluence of the 19th century, the Middle Ages became a pitiful era, highlighted by poverty and human misery, technological ineptness and lack of inventive spirit. The serf and his hovel, the aristocrat and his drafty castle, the priest and his austere existence became vivid reminders of how fortunate was the comfortable, well-fed bourgeois society of the 19th century. It was commonplace to conclude that an era which was so poor and backward materially must have been one poor in all ways. Such a conclusion helped to prove that the course of history led ever upward toward the better world.

The indictment against the Middle Ages was completed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the strong current of philosophical materialism with its concomitant fascination with the social sciences. Starting from the premise that all human activity was determined by the interaction of impersonal, material forces, the philosophers and social scientists assaulted the prevailing concepts of the nature of man. They tended to reduce him to an automaton driven willy-nilly by hunger, sex, and the subconscious urges of his own mind. Their heaviest blows were aimed at religion, since it seemed to contribute more than anything else toward deluding man into the foolish belief that he was a special creature nurtured and protected by a benevolent deity. With devastating effect philosophers and social scientists adduced evidence and argument to show that all religion was only a trick played by man upon himself, that what had always passed for divine truth

was only a feeble human attempt to account for or explain away man's hunger pangs, his sexual drives, and his repressed fears, and that rules of conduct predicated on so-called religious truth were chains shackling the natural man.

Christianity was the favorite target of these intellectuals, since Christian values predominated in the milieu in which the new thinking developed. And of course, the Middle Ages stood forth as the period in European history when man's enslavement to Christianity had been most marked. It was only too easy to picture the Middle Ages as a long era during which humanity was twisted and perverted by the acceptance of religious values. Some spokesmen of the new dispensation left no question of how evil they thought any period dominated by Christian values must have been. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, in evaluating the whole question of what he called "the religious neurosis," made it clear that a Christian society such as that of the Middle Ages was a hopeless one: "It is the profound, suspicious fear of an incurable pessimism which compels whole centuries to fasten their teeth into a religious interpretation of existence: the fear of the instinct which divines that truth might be attained *too soon*, before man has become strong enough, hard enough, artist enough."⁹ He was confident that he knew what happened to men living in such centuries: "The Christian faith from the beginning, is sacrifice: the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit; it is at the same time subjection, self-derision, and self-mutilation."¹⁰ Other thinkers, most of them more influential than Nietzsche, spoke in a vein which by inference made the medieval world and its values virtually ridiculous. The positivism of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer persuaded man that a society constructed on any other basis than on social laws empirically arrived at

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, III, 59, tr. Helen Zimmern (London and Edinburgh, 1914), p. 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 46, p. 65.

was a travesty. Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud added new dimensions to a quest for understanding human behavior, succeeding in the process in making religion a tool of oppression and mental distortion. The pragmatism of William James and John Dewey destroyed almost all confidence in any society which sought to attain goals defined *a priori*, and thereby raised serious doubts about the sanity of men who tied themselves to preconceived notions of what life was or ought to be. Jacob Burckhardt cast an ominous shadow over the whole range of medieval history when in his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* he argued that the Renaissance centered around the birth of a new, clearly more normal man who left behind the restrictions of the medieval world. Sir James Fraser made Christianity appear little different than a hundred other religions among primitive peoples, and by implication made its adherents little different than all the primitives caught up in a web of myths and magical practices. The total effect of the thinking of men of this order—and there were many more—was to build up a picture of medieval society which left no room for what might be presumed to be normal human activity. Burckhardt supplied a fitting summation of this point of view: “In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category.”¹¹ The Middle Ages were truly “dark ages,” in that there prevailed an atmosphere of abnormality and distortion of true humanity; this atmosphere was compounded out of the repression of the

¹¹ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy: An Essay*, tr. S. G. C. Middlemore, 2nd edition, revised (Oxford, London, and New York, 1945), p. 81.

natural human urges and the disregard for the true nature of man, all caused by a crew of ecclesiastical jailors who built prison walls for dumb prisoners out of a set of crudely manufactured truths called the Christian religion.

It has obviously been convenient for the adherents of nearly every major intellectual movement of the last five centuries to strengthen and to proselytize its cause by arguing its superiority over a not too distant past. Perhaps at no other time in the past has so much trust been placed in arguments based on the use of history to prove the validity and righteousness of a current cause. The result has been the creation of a series of images of the Middle Ages, all drawn around the failures of medieval society and individuals to do and think about things in conformity to the standards and ideas of various eras *since* the Middle Ages. Repeatedly the argument has run as follows. "Medieval men did not think or act or believe as we of the present do in these selected aspects of human endeavor; therefore, the Middle Ages must have been an inferior Dark Age." And thus emerged the typical picture of the Middle Ages as a period that was barbarous, sinful, unprogressive, unscientific, credulous, superstitious, oppressive, ignorant, neurotic, and poverty-ridden.

II

It is true that throughout these same five centuries there were strong champions of Middle Ages, prompted to its defense by diverse motives. Since the Renaissance all those who were moved by nationalistic considerations—artistic, literary, or political—were aware of the origins of European nations in the medieval period and often looked thence to clarify whatever aspect of national origins they might be concerned with. Especially in the 19th century did the nationalistically prompted interest in the Middle Ages wax strong. The whole Romantic movement discovered in medieval society a spirit akin to that which was the object of romanticist longing—

mystery, faith, emotion. Many 19th- and 20th-century reformers found in medieval society an order that contrasted favorably with the hard, stark realities of an industrial, war-torn, ideologically fragmented modern age. There has, therefore, always been an element of sympathy for the Middle Ages in the Western European tradition, contending with the stronger vein of condemnation and deprecation. This sympathetic view of the Middle Ages has acquired new vigor as a result of the efforts of objective historians who have labored with infinite patience to discover the true nature of medieval society and civilization. Especially during the past century have the Middle Ages been the subject of intense study. Probably the most notable result of this scholarly effort, aptly called the "revolt of the medievalists,"¹² has been the destruction of the substance of those highly critical evaluations of the medieval period which have been set down in the preceding pages. It is now clear that much too often during the past five centuries intellectuals have been guilty of evoking history to argue their causes without actually knowing history or without attempting to learn history. Most of their judgments of the Middle Ages simply will not stand the test of the facts about the Middle Ages.

Take, for instance, the contention of the Renaissance humanists that medieval society was intellectually barbarous because of its inability to write and speak the classical languages in their classical form. Modern scholarship has demonstrated that this judgment of the Middle Ages is somewhat less than a half truth. Throughout the Middle Ages there was a widespread, a genuine, and a productive interest in retaining a contact with the classical past through its literature. As early as the 5th and 6th centuries, Western European scholars began fighting a heroic struggle to perpetuate the Latin language and to save classical literary masterpieces, although they were laboring against a rising tide of barbarism stemming from

¹² Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, pp. 329 ff.

the Germanic invasions. By the 8th and 9th centuries their efforts had paid off well enough to permit a minor "renaissance," centering around the court of Charlemagne and in the schools founded by products of his court school. By the 12th century, fascination with the classical world had become a leading current in Western European intellectual life. The basic educational system, centering in the study of the seven liberal arts, was chiefly classical in content, since the texts used were derived from classical sources. This educational program produced several figures, exemplified by John of Salisbury, known for their skill in the use of Latin, their wide knowledge of classical literature, and their sophisticated appreciation of the classical spirit. The broadening contacts with the classical world touched nearly every aspect of 12th- and 13th-century life. Lawyers and statesmen connected with the church and the various states of Europe drew heavily on Roman law to instruct and guide their political thought and action. Theologians looked to the classical world, especially Greece, for knowledge to aid them in their search for truth. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, so respected and relied on Aristotle that he referred to Aristotle as "*the philosopher*," signifying a conviction that this ancient Greek was the epitome of human knowledge. That Aquinas could employ Aristotle's writing represents one of the most amazing chapters in the intellectual history of the world, since Western Europeans had to "recover" Greek philosophy by translating it from Arabic into Latin. Some men of the 12th and 13th centuries even found in classical literature a view of life that fitted their temper. Typical were the authors of the famous Goliardic poetry, composed by wandering scholars whose urbanity, sensuality, and secularity would have been appreciated in the 15th and 16th centuries. In view of these facets of medieval life, it is obvious that the Renaissance humanists were in error in their condemnation of the Middle Ages as a period characterized by antipathy toward and ignorance of

the classical heritage. Any modern medievalist can demonstrate beyond a doubt that the Renaissance humanists represent the culmination of a long quest to reappropriate the Graeco-Roman in Western European society. Only their ignorance of the Middle Ages allowed the humanists to treat the Middle Ages so disparagingly as an age of barbarity; a little knowledge would have shown them that their own fascination with the classical age had been endemic in Western European society for centuries before 1500.

The Reformation leaders were no less deficient in knowledge of medieval history than were the humanists. They were correct in their charge that primitive Christianity had experienced considerable change in the centuries following its origin. The religious history of the Middle Ages consists to a considerable degree of a series of transformations of Christianity leading toward the erection of a vast organization, a rigid ritual, a set dogma, and a well-defined code of discipline. Interwoven in the processes of transformation were enough compromises with the baser side of human nature to give a degree of truth to the charge that Roman Catholicism had contracted with the devil. However, the leaders of the Reformation disregarded a significant phase of medieval religious life that medieval scholars have brought to light. It is now clear that there burned fiercely in the hearts of medieval men the desire to "reform" religious life. Almost since its inception Christianity has engendered among its staunchest adherents a dissatisfaction with the way their contemporaries had fallen into sin. Repeatedly throughout the Middle Ages these impassioned spokesmen of reform preached their particular gospel and won their converts, causing momentous disturbances in the existing religious order on nearly every occasion. Gregory the Great, Boniface, Charlemagne, Bernard of Clairvaux, Arnold of Brescia, Gregory VII, the Cathari, the Waldensians, Francis of Assisi, Dominic, Catherine of Sienna, John Wyclif, the Brethren of the Common Life—to

catalogue but a few names—all stand in a long line of seekers after a more perfect Christian life. Their battle cries would have pleased the Reformation leaders, for they too advocated a return to Christ, a purification of the spirit, a search for meaning behind the forms of religion, and a purgation of the children of sin from the community of the blessed. Indeed, often without knowing it, sixteenth-century reformers expressed convictions and sentiments that had many times before rung across the religious scene in Europe. The Protestant Reformation stands as one in a series of struggles to purify and rejuvenate the flagging Christian spirit. In the eyes of a medievalist the Reformation leaders committed a grievous fault when they condemned and blackened the name of a whole age because it produced what they thought to be a travesty of Christianity without recognizing that that same age produced a legion of reformers.

Modern scholarship has likewise raised serious doubts about the scoffing assault on the Middle Ages by the intellectual leaders of the Enlightenment. It is true that scientific progress was slight during the Middle Ages and that the vast majority of men adhered stoutly to a faith whose basic tenets were thought to be beyond rational demonstration. Medieval men were convinced that a benign deity intervened in the natural order of things. These attitudes—and many more—stand in sharp contrast with the convictions of the Enlightenment. Yet these dissimilarities are not sufficient to separate the 18th century completely from the Middle Ages. Current scholarship would place the Enlightenment (including the scientific “revolution” that preceded it) in a relationship of *dependence* on the Middle Ages. From the point of view of intellectual history the greatest medieval achievement consisted of the attempt to discover what segments of the cosmic economy could be understood by the human mind, and to organize man’s knowledge so as to make comprehensible the working of the cosmic order. Put another way, medieval thinkers

struggled to reduce the area wherein man must know only by blind dependence on revelation, and to broaden the area where the human mind could comprehend the absolute truth by virtue of its own powers. This quest for the reasonable culminated in the work of the 13th-century scholastics, whose compendious *Summae* stand as commemorations of the ability of the human mind to perceive the universal order.

Viewed in terms of the object of human inquiry, the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment have much in common. Both ages were preoccupied with the task of finding a rational explanation of the universe that would give man the power to understand it. Medieval intellectual development was a necessary preparatory period presaging what emerged later. The Abelards and the Aquinases struggled to end man's passive dependence on illumination from the Almighty in order to know. They predicated that the universe was orderly and comprehensible. They undertook anew the process of putting to use man's mental facilities—his reason, his powers of observation, his ability to organize knowledge—and succeeded in convincing many in their world that man could by virtue of his own powers probe the innermost secrets of the universe. All later generations who believed in the rationality of man, in his ability to observe accurately the operation of nature, and in his power to extract meaningful conclusions from observations—all of them built upon these medieval foundations. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, seeking to magnify their own efforts, distorted the truth in trying to disavow their medieval antecedents. Their tirades against medieval mysticism, superstition, and credulity blackened the reputation of a whole era without leaving room to acknowledge the efforts of medieval thinkers who also battled against mysticism, superstition, and credulity. Indeed, to take an extreme position, there would have been no Enlightenment had not medieval scholastics like Abelard and Thomas Aquinas first seized intellectual leadership from competing

mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventura, who believed that an obliteration of reason was a necessary prelude to wisdom and truth, and had not medieval scholars developed intellectual disciplines and educational techniques capable of sharpening the rational powers. The success of those scholastics opened the channel down which the main current of European thought has passed in subsequent centuries.

Modern evaluations of medieval political life have nearly demolished the interpretation placed upon the Middle Ages by the spokesmen of the liberal-democratic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries. It is now fairly clear that medieval political development centered around the establishment of the principle of limited government. In contrast with the classical world, where the state was absolute in its power to command the individual, the Middle Ages witnessed the enrooting of the concept that political life was but one limited facet of the totality of human activity. The path leading to the enshrinement of this principle was torturous. The destruction of the sanctity of the state in the West began perhaps as early as the Germanic invasions, during which a series of barbarian kings performed so pitifully that their failures discredited the state as an instrument contributing to human welfare. The post-invasion chaos eventually produced feudalism. Essentially, the feudal system sought to establish a basis for government through the instrumentality of a contract whereby two individuals bound themselves on oath to respect specified rights and obligations toward each other. This idea of specific mutual rights and responsibilities became the touchstone of the feudal monarchies that emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages and developed into modern national states. Although the medieval kings of England, France, Spain, and Germany managed to forge an imposing array of governmental institutions which allowed them to curb the worst disorders of primitive feudalism, none was ever able to exercise power without respect for the rights of those subjects who

were his vassals. Repeatedly medieval kings admitted these limitations on their powers by granting charters and laws confirming the rights of their subjects and by calling upon their subjects for advice in deciding policy. Intermingled with this feudal concept of limitations on government were the ideas that emerged from the medieval struggle between secular and ecclesiastical authorities. In terms of political significance, this resounding clash resulted in the establishment of the idea that there existed a realm of human activity into which the state had no right to intrude. Although this realm was hard to define, and although ecclesiastical powers were tempted to claim absolute authority for themselves, the final result was a further delimitation of the state. The struggle between church and state was equally significant in that it drove ambitious princes, lay and ecclesiastical, to seek a higher principle—a natural law—upon which their claims to authority could be based. Again the upshot was a limitation of the powers of the state.

In view of these facets of medieval political history, the proponents of revolution against the *ancien régime* probably should have been more respectful in their judgments of the Middle Ages. The ideological framework for the liberal-democratic movement emerged out of the Middle Ages. The upheavals of the late 18th and 19th centuries sought to make effective the principles that were written indelibly in Western European society during the Middle Ages. Constitutions limiting the powers of government had their genesis in feudal contracts and in grants of privileges to the medieval church. Representative bodies descended from medieval feudal assemblies called by kings to consult those subjects whose rights every medieval crown had to respect. Fundamental “rights of men” reflected the arguments invoked by medieval polemicists to demonstrate what the natural law said about ruler and ruled. Perhaps the liberal-democratic movement was not really a revolt against the *ancien régime*; instead it may be

seen as a revolt to make more universal the principles upon which the *ancien régime* was founded. Such a conclusion makes it doubtful whether the Middle Ages can be called a desert in political terms, capable only of producing an oppressive, unenlightened political order.

There has been little that the medievalist could do to counter the charge of the disciples of 19th-century progress that the medieval period was poor and backward in a material sense. A low standard of living and a lack of technical progress were abiding conditions for centuries. Medievalists have been able to demonstrate that Western European society increased its wealth and its level of comfort and that there was considerable technical advance in the centuries between 500 and 1500. And it is incontrovertible that the capitalistic outlook, so intimately connected with 19th-century economic expansion, was born in medieval society. However, these marks of material progress are pale in comparison to the strides made in the 19th century. Still, the judgment of the progressivists about the Middle Ages remains one of dubious value. It holds only insofar as one is ready to make material wealth the criterion of the vigor and maturity of a civilization. To defend such a standard involves the historian in nearly insuperable difficulties. He must explain why great civilizations were stricken with a fatal weakness in the midst of material abundance. He must account for the obvious fact that material prosperity alone seldom creates a full and satisfactory life for an individual or a community. In short, any evaluation of the worth of an era in history simply on the basis of material considerations is a questionable one, leaving unexplored vast areas in which activities of great significance transpire. This was exactly the shortcoming of the progressivist judgment of the Middle Ages. The proponents of this school of thought saw the material backwardness of the medieval period and refused to look more, concluding that material poverty must have signified universal weakness and lack of

creativity. Any fair-minded man, realizing the inadequacies of such a standard of judgment, will at least admit that the Middle Ages might have had some importance not measurable by material standards.

The assault of the 19th-century social scientists on the Middle Ages is likewise a case involving the validity of standards of judgment. The medievalist has to admit that medieval men were religious, that they restricted their conduct in terms of religious standards, and that they viewed man as a specially created being animated by a soul which was a reflection of divinity in man. He could, of course, confront his materialistic, deterministic tormentors with abundant evidence that medieval man respected and enjoyed the lustier, naturalistic side of human nature. To do this he only need recall the career of Abelard, the monk who at least on occasion failed to curb his sex drives, or quote from the lusty *fabliaux*, or guide his audience to selected portions of *The Canterbury Tales*, or lead any who would follow to the portal of Amiens cathedral to view the extremely human countenances of Christ and a legion of saints looking down on all comers. All such evidence of the degree to which medieval man lovingly grasped life and enjoyed it would not, however, counteract the fundamental fact that medieval society was founded on a religious interpretation of human nature. The only problem in evaluating the 19th-century social scientist's condemnation of the Middle Ages rests on the validity of his basis of judgment. If man is a product of impersonal physical, economic, and psychological forces, and if human well-being consists of adjustment to enslavement by these forces, then medieval society was a horrible one, completely stifling human nature with false values, imposing on individuals modes of conduct bound to induce neuroses, and holding up to man prizes that his puny nature put beyond his reach. Can we at mid-20th century be so sure, however, that the social scientists have established the final definition of human nature? Is it an

established fact or merely an interesting hypothesis that man is a pawn of hunger, sex, weather, and his own silly dreams? These questions, unless they can be answered unqualifiedly, make it ridiculous to condemn medieval society simply because it thought and acted in terms of a different interpretation of human nature. Those who accepted the word of the social scientists that the Middle Ages represented the worst of all ages are obliged to admit the possibility that their mentors were looking at the era through special glasses whose focus may well have been grossly in error. Condemnation of a thousand years is hardly logical in view of this doubt.

III

It appears, then, that the conventional, derogatory uses of the terms "medieval" and "Middle Ages" which so often emanate from the press, the lecture platform, and polite conversation are the products of an ignorance of the history of that era and of an unconscious distortion arising from too great anxiety to promote new causes and ideas. It is no longer intellectually honest to dismiss a thousand years of history with a few adjectives suggesting darkness, ignorance, squalor, and extreme credulity. Does it then follow that the terms must be eliminated from our vocabulary? Does it mean that there is no sense in which "Middle Ages" can be used with at least a degree of accuracy? The medievalist would return a "no" to both of these questions. Modern scholarship has clearly suggested a new concept of the period in question. So vital is this new concept that its acceptance would serve to check the tendency in modern intellectual life to lose touch with what is really significant from the past and thereby to wallow deeper into a dangerous slough of present-mindedness, content to accept a few catch phrases about the quality and character of important chapters in history.

The first step toward reorienting all views of the Middle Ages requires that men cease thinking of this period as one

of over a thousand years characterized by lack of change, by unending movement through time on a level plane. This habit lies at the base of the simplified concepts dissected in the preceding pages. The Middle Ages embraced a millenium full of human activity which the record shows to have been as variegated as that of any other span of human history. Through these centuries forces worked, men aspired, events unfolded in a fashion which produced an ever changing scene. Dynamism was the fundamental aspect of medieval history, just as it is whenever human beings are involved. Thus no handful of adjectives will ever adequately characterize the Middle Ages. He who wants to know something about the period must study in detail the play of men and forces at a specific time and place. The dictionary of synonyms will not suffice as a source for understanding the Middle Ages.

Having conceded that the medieval period was one when all the dynamic processes that shape human destiny were operative, those seeking to reach a meaning for the term "Middle Ages" can go on to the next step. The Middle Ages must be seen as a period that cannot be marked by sharp breaks signifying a beginning and an end. It, like all other ages in human history, forms a chapter in a complete volume. To read this chapter by itself engenders distortion and puzzlement. To read the whole volume of human history with this chapter missing ends with a sense of incompleteness and misunderstanding of the whole. To realize this should end forever the tendency to expunge the Middle Ages from the record, to think of dismissing that era as a mistake and an unspeakable horror. Whether one ends liking or disliking the Middle Ages is beside the point; in fact, the period did exist as a chapter in the total history of mankind and must be accepted for what the record shows it to have been.

However, in the totality of human history the medieval period has a particular place that emerges with increasing clarity as a result of the efforts of modern scholars. It begins

with the coming together of a particular set of forces in a particular geographical area. The area was primarily the western provinces of the Roman Empire. The forces that met on this soil were three: a senescent classical civilization, a vigorous religious movement, and a barbarian people. At the moment of the encounter of these three forces, classical Graeco-Roman civilization was dying; its values and its basic institutions were incapable of guiding and controlling those who fell within its confines. However, even in its death throes it still provided a wonderfully developed mode of civilized life capable of affecting the emergent new order. The new religion, Christianity, was in the full vigor of youth at the moment of encounter of the three forces. It had incorporated into its beliefs, organization, rituals, and system of values a considerable portion of the classical while still retaining its independence from classical civilization, thereby becoming a movement capable of seizing the leadership of society and of providing the *élan vital* for a regeneration of society. The new invaders, the Germanic peoples, were lusty barbarians, not singularly devoted to their ancient way of life and thus capable of learning. Their eagerness, their intelligence, their vigor provided the active force in the new scene.

The meeting of these three forces at a moment in history was a unique event, occurring no place else on the face of the earth. Out of this unique meeting there almost immediately began to emerge a new pattern of culture, a new civilization, confined to a specific geographical area. New institutions, new ideals, new values, new techniques, and new concepts sprouted everywhere, all of them bearing the marks of descent from classical civilization, Christianity, and Germanic barbarism, yet each unique in that it represented a mixture of these antecedent forces. Here indeed is a new viewpoint toward the Middle Ages. The medieval period represents a certain phase in the total stream of history during which was born a new civilization, affiliated to an older order, yet dis-

tinctively new. To a historian such an event is indeed one of the high points in the total record of the past. Certainly the birth throes of the new order entailed a full share of human misery and disorder, yet these disturbances appear somewhat less than the whole story when placed in context with the exciting processes of creativity that accompanied the birth of a new order. Moreover, the centuries that unfolded after the first encounter of classical Graeco-Roman civilization, Christianity, and the Germans assume a new dimension hardly measured by adjectives such as dark, barbarous, bestial, stagnant, ignorant, and all the rest which are so thoughtlessly applied to the Middle Ages. Instead, the passing centuries of the Middle Ages were filled with the dramatic events that always accompany the maturation of a new civilization. Where is the intellect so dull that it cannot be excited by the spectacle surrounding the shaping of new political institutions, new techniques for securing a livelihood, new ways of expressing feeling for the divine, and new modes of expressing ideas in art and writing? These were the kind of events that loomed largest in the scene in Western Europe over the centuries after Rome's fall. They have been too long hidden from view because of the prejudices created by those who chose to characterize the Middle Ages in a fashion laudatory to their particular system of values and who selected with care only that kind of activity which pictured the Middle Ages as they wanted the era portrayed.

Perhaps a realization that the Middle Ages embraced a period dominated by the birth and maturing of a unique civilization will supply enough reason to encourage the dismissal of long held prejudices against that millenium. However, the task of redefining the Middle Ages has not yet been completed. During those centuries there was slowly engrained into Western European society a set of values that persisted with amazing vigor. These values stand as the core of Western European civilization, distinguishing it from all other civiliza-

tions that have existed or still exist. They embrace a basic concept of man, his capabilities, his shortcomings, and his ultimate destiny, all of which taken together make the Western European man unique in the world. These values were derived primarily from Christianity or from Christianized derivations from the classical world and from the early Germans. They have supplied the driving force and the limiting bounds of most historical developments in Western Europe and those parts of the world directly influenced by Western Europe since the Middle Ages. Once again, then, the Middle Ages take on new proportions in the total stream of history. Not only was a distinctive civilization born in the Middle Ages but also its basic viewpoints have played a major role in shaping the pattern of events since the Middle Ages. All of which makes those who today claim a partnership in the Western European world kinsmen of the men of the Middle Ages and dependents upon medieval society, for good or bad, for the basic values animating society.

The persistence of values across the centuries from the Middle Ages to the present raises the problem of setting the end of the Middle Ages, conventionally dated about 1500. This arbitrary date now has almost no significance; it stands as an artificial barrier which screens the true character of the Middle Ages from present viewers. When one speaks in terms of fundamental values animating society, the Middle Ages have not yet ended. He who believes in the equality of men in the sight of God reflects a medieval viewpoint. Those who are convinced that the political and economic order must operate in terms of a higher morality or law are medieval. Those who confess that man has an obligation to use his intellect to understand the universe would have found kindred spirits in medieval society. This is but the beginning of a long list of values that derive from the medieval scheme of things. No one would claim that all thinking contemporaries agree with

all of these basic assumptions about the universal order and man's place in it. However, any fair-minded man would agree that enough people still subscribe to these convictions to allow one to say that the "medieval" has lived on and that the present climate in Western European society and its overseas adjuncts has derived directly from the Middle Ages.

This leads to the conclusion that the only way one can speak of the end of the Middle Ages is in terms of the shifting of the institutional patterns in which basic values expressed themselves. A medieval institution, the universal church, gave way to a different set of religious institutions in the 16th century. However, the basic set of Christian religious ideas changed little if any as a result of that change. The concept of limited government found expression in feudalism; a later change gave expression to that same ideal in representative constitutionalism. The Western European faith that man was capable of understanding the cosmos found expression in medieval scholasticism, in 18th-century mechanistic science, and in 19th-century evolutionary science. Each change marking the passage from one stage to another in the quest for a synthetic understanding of the universe does indeed mean the end of one thing and the beginning of another. Yet the break was never a complete revolution, because the conviction that prompted outward action remained basically the same. It is no longer permissible, then, to accept the word of those who joyfully declaim the end of the Middle Ages, unless they are compelled to say specifically what institution they are talking about and unless they are forced to admit that what signaled their "new age" was fundamentally an attempt to give outward expression to a set of values that has characterized Western European civilization since its inception in the Middle Ages. And those proclaimers of the end of the Middle Ages and the birth of the "modern" world might well be reminded that the very thing they are touting as a revolution

occurred repeatedly between 500 and 1500, namely, a constant change in the institutional pattern within which a set of values found expression.

A summary statement concerning the meaning of the term "Middle Ages" might depart from a text drawn from a strange source: Adolf Hitler. He is alleged to have remarked that he felt that his mission in life was to end the Middle Ages. This appears to have been as intelligent a statement as he ever uttered and perhaps a fitting reflection of his peculiar genius. Hitler saw that what blocked his demoniacal scheme to remake the Western European world was an ancient, deeply enrooted set of values determining the way Europeans thought and behaved. To have his way he must extirpate these values. Therein lies the core of an understandable and defensible definition of "Middle Ages." The medieval period was an era during which a particular set of values took hold of a particular body of people living in a specific area and became so firmly enrooted in that society that those values persisted until the present. The Middle Ages form an integral part of a continuum that has not yet run its course, as Hitler discovered at the hands of those who leaped to the defense of the values he dubbed "medieval."