



THE SOCIAL DYNAMIC OF THE MIDDLE AGES—II

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F medieval man can be said to differ strikingly from his modern brother, it is because, essentially, he had a sense of balance. With both feet on the ground, intellectually and emotionally, he knew where he had come from, where he was going, and why he was on the way. Our own age has been called an age of "sublime disorder." What sublimity can be had in disorder is, to say the least, questionable. But the rhetorical flourish of the expression can be pardoned in the light of its really significant indictment of the twentieth century.

Medieval man had a veritable passion for order. Everything in the scheme of the universe had to have its place, and the ultimate determination of a place was dependent upon its specific relation to an end. The operation of blind forces, the fortuitous juxtaposition of fundamental elements, the quixotic rôle of pure chance—all this would have been ridiculed by men of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Of course, even then, there were some who held one or all of these theories. But the universally accepted philosophy of life regarded the universe and all things in it as definitely purposive. Design and unity were equally obvious in the movement of the planets and in the flight of a bee. All things moved toward an end and that end was conceived to be God.

Applied to strictly human life, this conviction was the determining factor in medieval social, economic, and political activity. While medieval man trod the earth he had his eyes lifted to the stars. For him the focal point of all history was Calvary. And history was meaningless unless it was susceptible of the interpretation given it by Him who hung on Calvary's Cross. Human life, then, was thought to be successful only in so far as it approximated the ideals of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But in the striving toward this goal, the virtuous life presupposed a proper disposition of means toward the end. Basically, this was the simple logic behind the medieval theory of society and its notion of the common good.

That men should live together in society seemed perfectly

obvious in the Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas, Saint and Prince of medieval thinkers, gave this concept enduring form in his *De Regimine Principum*. Combining simplicity and clarity with his characteristic genius for analysis, St. Thomas says: "It is natural for man to be a social and political animal, to live in a group, even more than all other animals, as the very needs of his nature indicate. For all other animals nature has prepared food, hair as a covering, teeth, horns, claws as a means of defense, or at least speed in flight. Man, on the other hand, was created without any natural provision for these things. But instead of them all he was endowed with reason, by the use of which he could procure all these things for himself by the use of his hands. But one man alone is not able to procure them all for himself; for one man could not sufficiently provide for life, unassisted. It is, therefore, natural that man should live in company with his fellows."¹

However, while medieval man accepted society as a certain corporate union dictated by his very nature, he would not have admitted that it was *identical* with the human organism to which it was conveniently likened. True, each individual and group of individuals within the social group had their functional rôles as did the organs of a vital being. Their hierarchical subordination paralleled that of the organism. But here the comparison exhausted itself. For, while it was perceived that it was impossible for the diverse organs of a physical composite to have being apart from the composite from which they derived life, the individual could and did have a separate existence apart from his social group. He had his personal life with all those duties and consequent inviolable rights which flowed from the notion of himself as a rational being. This being the fact, he considered himself prior to society both in nature and time.

On the other hand, the idea of man as entirely independent of society was likewise rejected. The classic argument of St. Thomas, given above, was adhered to by medieval men. The concept of society as a conglomeration of wholly independent individuals, sometimes compared to so many atoms, may have found favor with the Greeks as it does with some moderns. It was wholly foreign to the Middle Ages. The medieval theory of society, then, followed a middle course between the extremes of what the twentieth century would recognize as Totalitarian-

¹ *De Regimine Principum*, lib. I, c. 1. (Translation by G. P. Phelan, New York, 1938).

ism and Rugged Individualism. "It was a synthesis of the two, which consists in the recognition on the one hand of the limited independence of the individual within the social whole and on the other, of the genuine moral solidarity of all individuals within the one social structure; one, that is, in its external order, and many in the multitude of its members."²

Predicated on this concept of society, it followed logically that the supreme criterion of individual-social activity should be the common good. In the last analysis this common good was nothing else but the adequate end of society—immediately, the tranquillity of order or peace, and mediately, the disposition of all things for the ultimate attainment of eternal beatitude for the multitude. Fundamentally, the common good was defined as common in opposition to the private good of each individual. This opposition, however, was not understood to exclude private good. On the contrary, the very essence of the common good was the notion that it overflowed into the private good of each and every individual comprising the social group.

The practical application of this social doctrine to concrete situations was everywhere in evidence. However, since the medieval attitude toward wealth has been the subject of so much misunderstanding, it would seem very much to the point to confine ourselves to a brief exposition of this medieval theory in its relation to the larger doctrine of the common good.

Basically, a man's attitude toward wealth is contingent upon his attitude toward life in general. In the preceding paragraphs an effort was made to indicate that the medieval concept of life was definitely theocentric. Essentially, the unifying factor in the Middle Ages was a common faith. That faith revealed to man that mortal life was but the threshold of eternity. God was the rationalizing element in human life. Religion was regarded as something with a relation to every conceivable human act. It permeated the entire fabric of rational activity. It was not a departmental thing to be paraded on Sundays and discarded on Monday morning for the rest of the week. It was, in the medieval scheme of things, an ever-present and imperious reality. Accepting unequivocally this philosophy of life, medieval man saw no incongruity in subjecting the business of making a living to extra-economic criteria. In a word, wealth for wealth's sake was decidedly out. The Middle Ages regarded wealth solely as

² Miltner, Charles C., C.S.C., "Social Unity and the Individual," *The Thomist*, Vol. 1, p. 41.

a means to an end. That end, proximately, was the fullest possible development of the human personality and the consequent collective good of the community realized by the individual well-being of all its component parts. Ultimately, it was the individual and collective attainment of eternal beatitude.

Father Fanfani, in contrasting the spirit underlying modern Capitalism with the Christian ethos of the pre-capitalistic period, provides us with a summation of the whole doctrine when he says: "The primary characteristic of the pre-capitalist spirit is that the choice of means of acquiring goods is determined by criteria, not of pure utility, but of utility only in so far as is compatible with the vigorous existence of extra-economic criteria. . . . Since the capitalist's moral code does not impose any limitation on the use of lawful and useful means, the primary characteristic of the capitalist spirit is the *unlimited use* of all means of acquiring wealth that are held to be morally lawful and economically useful."

And again: "The rules of religious and social morality accepted by the European pre-capitalist gave him an idea of wealth as a means for the attainment of the natural and supernatural ends both of *him who had and him who had not*. . . . There was thus a limit to the pre-capitalist's enjoyment of his goods, just as the current conception of wealth limited him in acquiring them, by ruling out means that were not considered moral and *limiting the use* of those that were moral. This two-fold limitation sprang from the subordination of economic to extra-economic (politico-religious) ends."³

Given this appreciation of the medieval mentality in its conception of wealth, the teaching of the theologians is nothing more than a scientific presentation of the dominant viewpoint or conviction on the subject. It was not, as has been maintained, the device of priestcraft to keep medieval man under the ecclesiastical heel. From St. Thomas in the thirteenth century to St. Antoninus in the fifteenth the doctrine is continuous, uncompromising, and reasonable.

In the heyday of the period, St. Thomas, while admitting the necessity of temporal goods as indispensable for the living of a full life, nevertheless, warns of the dangers inherent in the pursuit of possessions. He says that solicitude for material things may become illicit in three ways: "First on the part of

³ Fanfani, A., *Catholicism, Protestantism, and Capitalism* (New York, 1935), pp. 24-27. (Italics ours).

the object of solicitude, that is, if we seek temporal things as an end. . . . Secondly, through too much earnestness in endeavoring to obtain temporal things, the result being that a man is drawn away from spiritual things which ought to be the chief object of his desires. . . . Thirdly, through overmuch fear, when, to wit, a man fears to lack necessary things if he does what he ought to.”⁴

As the Middle Ages were about to give way to our modern period, St. Antoninus reasserted the unchanging teaching. Father Bede Jarrett, O.P., summarized the Florentine’s doctrine thus: “By his possessions man was intended to ward off the anxiety of the morrow and rest in simple content. He was to find in them sustenance and livelihood, and to employ them in the support of his family. Beyond this immediate serviceableness the instruments of wealth have a nobler use in leading men on to God. . . . Moreover, because in man the soul is of greater import than the body and always has the prior claims to allegiance, it follows that the whole science of economics (i.e. the science that seeks to regulate the relations between riches and life) is ultimately a moral one, and must be dominated by principles of justice and must harmonize with the Ten Commandments. Sin, accordingly, becomes an economic evil, and an economic evil, in its completer sense, becomes a sin.”⁵

The purpose in this section has been to give an adequate idea of the ethical philosophy prevailing in the most representative medieval period. No claim is made that the actuality equated the ideal. History would give the lie to such a position. But the fact is that this social theory was the one accepted. If medieval men did not in every instance show fidelity to the ideal, it was not because they denied its manifest reasonableness. Rather, it was because the purely human intruded where the supernatural should have reigned. It was only when men apostatized from the faith which gave meaning to the ideal that it ceased to be the supreme criterion of social, economic, and political life.

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It is axiomatic that a certain index of a people’s civilization is its respect for law. “Civilization can become evident, only as a society settles down, and as it settles down organization appears and law begins, for law is the reign of order. Law implies the acceptance by a group of people of certain common regulations; it presupposes that these people have already been

⁴ *Summa Theol.*, II-IIae, q. 55, a. 6.

⁵ *Saint Antonino and Medieval Economics* (St. Louis, 1914) p. 60.

made conscious of their unity; it presupposes too their submission not only to a ruler but to rule.”⁶

In our own age law is generally regarded as something onerous. By and large it is conceded to be acceptable only just so long as it does not impinge on personal liberty. Observance of the law is usually a matter of expediency. If legal restrictions, no matter what they may be, can be circumvented without suffering a penalty, the circumvention is attempted. The reasons for this attitude are many and varied. Fundamentally, however, it would seem that they are reducible to two. In the first place a modern conceives law to be something *external* to himself, something superimposed upon life. Secondly, the essentially supernatural basis of all law is not universally accepted.

The picture in the Middle Ages is entirely different. For the medieval man, law was as much a part of his very being as it was of the universe in which he lived. Ultimately, it had its justification in the fact of a Supreme Lawgiver—God. St. Thomas gives classic definition to the medieval concept when he says: “Law is an ordination of reason, for the common good, promulgated by him who has care of the community.” The Thomistic theory of law was not a concoction of the thirteenth century. Rather, it was nothing more than an ordered statement of what medieval man already accepted in fact.

Analysing briefly the four distinct elements in St. Thomas’ definition, it is not difficult to understand why men in the Middle Ages had such a profound respect for law. In the first place, law is a *rule*, a measure of action by which something is impelled to or restrained from some end. But the measure and rule of human acts, since they are essentially rational acts, is reason. For it is the function of reason to *direct and ordain* to an end. This emphasis upon reason rather than will is vitally important. Without the proper understanding of reason’s rôle in law, the restrictions upon government make little sense.

The prerequisite that all law should be directive to the common good is the logical principle upon which is founded a definite medieval conviction. The common good and its implications have been discussed above. It suffices here to reassert that it guarantees to the individual the opportunity to develop his personality to the fullest extent within the structure of the social group. It is the assurance of a reasonable human life.

⁶ Jarrett, Bede, O.P., *Social Theories of the Middle Ages* (Boston, 1926), p. 1.

Political authority, according to the medieval concept, comes *immediately* from God and *mediately* (or instrumentally) from the people. Authority was considered to be the natural correlative of society. Men by their nature are impelled to live together. Therefore God, the Author of nature, must endow them with the faculty of governing themselves. Authority, then, resides in the community as a whole. No one man, however, was conceded to have more authority than another, and in this sense a certain equality was admitted. But it was obvious that, if each man exercised individual authority, something very much like chaos would result. Hence, one or a few were chosen or accepted as ruler or rulers. To them society *delegated* its authority. God then ratified the authority of the leader and thenceforth he alone was to rule. This rule, however, was not to be an arbitrary thing. It was to be a rule of reason and directed toward the attainment of the common good. If and when a ruler failed to rule according to reason and for the best interests of the community, he could be deposed. The rule of a tyrant, consequently, could be resisted actively or passively as the circumstances of the case dictated. The "divine right of kings" is the product of an earlier and later period. It is not the doctrine of the Middle Ages. "Law is a product of reason. Laws do not pop out of the legislature because congress is in a mood for legislation or because there is nothing more exciting to do. Like all acts of reason they are themselves for a goal, or they are not laws at all, not reasonable at all, not human. And the goal at which all law aims is usually called 'the common good!'"⁷

Finally, that law be enforceable, it is only reasonable that it should be known by those to whom it is to apply. Hence it must be promulgated.

If time and space permitted we could elaborate on the ramifications of law in the social group, its historical background, and its division. But since the idea behind this section has been, primarily, to sketch the fundamental legal concepts of the Middle Ages, such a procedure would not be exactly to the point. Enough has been said, we hope, to indicate that, being a very sane sort of individual, medieval man demanded a sane rule for his actions. That rule was law—the rule of reason. Within the fabric of that law and by the norms of that rule, operated the social dynamic of the Middle Ages—the dictate of the common good.

⁷ Farrell, Walter, O.P., *A Companion to the Summa*, (London, 1938), p. 369.