

Lesson 8: Western Civilization in the Middle Ages

Source: William R. Cannon, *History of Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960).

Introduction

There is something fascinating about the Middle Ages—so different than our age, like discovering a new world! Yes—much of its allure comes from being opposite our modern age:

Medieval Culture	Modern Culture
Vertical Hierarchy (spired Gothic cathedral)	Horizontal Egalitarian (flat-topped box skyscraper)

Beware! One extreme leads to another extreme. Both eras are fallen—some things right, some things wrong. “We are looking new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

Thirteenth Century – Christian Civilization in the West

While not perfect, Cannon claims that the West achieved a unique union of Christianity and culture (p. 252). The union of sacred and secular is symbolized by a new kind of monk—the mendicant friars. The institutional fruit of this era shows the cultural benefits of Christianity (cf. Titus 2:10 – “all faith is good”).

Mendicant Friars – traveling, begging monks

Dominic – Spaniard Domingo de Guzman (1170-1221)

Barefooted, blond-headed preacher to the Albigenses – started an order of educated, traveling preachers
Sixteen trained at one mansion (1214) – within six years, networked in eight countries (60 converts)

Francis of Assisi – Italian extreme ascetic (1182-1226)

Son of middle-class merchant – renounces the world, separates from his father: “I am the son of a King.”
Prays to own nothing and live off of what others give him—vermin in clothes, dies naked.

Difference?

The older monastic orders left the world, often to seek personal salvation.

The Dominicans entered the world to *do something*—to beg, embrace learning, and preach the “gospel.”
The Franciscans entered the world to *be something*—to beg, renounce learning, and display the “gospel.”

Note: It is doubtful how many in the Middle Ages actually understood the real meaning of the gospel.

Institutional Fruit – the surprising medieval origin of modern institutions

Hospitals – started by Pope Innocent III in Rome and the idea spread rapidly (100+ in Germany by AD 1300)

Examples: Paris (endowed or tax-supported) and London (St. Bartholomew's, Bedlam) – cf. leprosaria

Guilds – trade unions of artisans in various communities

Stages: apprentice (age 10 or 11), journeyman (after 4-5 years, traveled), master (back in the community)
Features: seven-hour days, regular dues, insurance, pensions, cared for the disabled or those orphaned

Universities – a guild of teachers, a “distinctly medieval creation” (Cannon, p. 282)

As with the trades, those skilled in knowledge became “masters,” able to train others in disputation.

Stages: undergraduate (trivium and quadrivium), graduate (specialized in philosophy, medicine, theology)

Libraries: expensive books chained to a stall, most had less than one hundred books (Canterbury, 5000)

One year’s wages for a teacher bought the cheapest book—a Bible cost five year’s wages!

Why? It took a diligent copyist a *year* to transcribe one Bible.

Scholasticism – the systematizing of all current knowledge, often through the *Sentences* and put in a *Summa*

Franciscan Theologians – Alexander of Hale (summa “heavier than a horse”), Bonaventura, Duns Scotus

Initially held to Augustine’s faith-seeking-understanding until Duns Scotus split apart faith and reason

Dominican Theologians – Albert Magnus, Thomas Aquinas

Incorporated into theology a reason-unto-faith using Aristotle (e.g. nature as seeking its full potential).

Both sides were scholastics, eager to apply deductive logic to established knowledge, but was enough known?

Scientific Method – the emphasis on experimenting and observing (so-called “Baconian science”)

The ideas of theologian Robert Grosseteste (Oxford), as put forth by Roger Bacon, emphasized God’s freedom.

Therefore, it is better to observe God’s ways than assume God’s ways through logical deduction—but is it?

Solution? *Keep the tension of God’s name being free (I AM THAT I AM) and known in revelation (Ex. 34:6-7).*