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IS THE CHURCH REALLY TO BLAME?

Shedding Light on the "Dark Ages"

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The Inquisition, the Crusades, the stifling of science—Christianity often gets a bad rap when it comes to the Middle Ages. But what does history actually reveal about the influence of Christianity upon Western civilization?

The Inquisition was rare and unusual, not characteristic of the church as a whole. It actually was an improvement upon prior standards of justice. Inquisitors announced formal charges, sought the testimony of witnesses, and asked defendants to supply evidence of their innocence, all paving the way for modern judicial systems. Inquisitors took their time—sometimes a decade—before reaching a verdict. The medieval Inquisition was both more fair-minded and more transparent than the secret police of twentieth-century communist regimes. Church authorities did not themselves execute convicts, but only recommended punishment to secular authorities. Admittedly, the system was far from perfect and sometimes quite horrific. For example, some “confessions” were torture-forced.

There’s a sobering reminder here that human zeal so easily can depart from the true love of God and true love for

one’s neighbors. The Inquisition was not, however, merely a “Dark Ages” institution—it lasted until the 1800s, past the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. Nor did the faults of the Inquisition originate within Christian doctrine, but rather in a departure from biblical teachings concerning justice. Deuteronomy 19:15, for example, requires two, or better still, three credible witnesses before condemning the accused. Similarly, the Law of Moses, with only seventeen capital offenses, showed far more mercy than England’s criminal code of the 1600s, which tallied 148 capital offenses.

Like the Inquisition, the Crusades also were a mixed bag. In many ways, the Crusades were a defensive war against Islamic armies that already had conquered one third of Europe, disarmed the populace, limited their economic opportunities, and forbidden them from sharing the Gospel beyond their own families. Often their children were taken from them, enlisted in the Islamic army, and forced to fight against Christians. No follower of Christ, nor anyone appreciative of peace or justice, should have been content with Islamic oc-

cupation. Unfortunately, Christians’ “crusades” against Islam also included instances of wanton violence plus an idolatrous preoccupation with holy relics. This is a good reminder that not everything done in the name of Christianity is right, but at the same time, we should avoid the opposite extreme of supposing that there was nothing good about the Crusades. Codes of chivalry promoted honorable leadership. Islamic imperialism was repelled. The Gospel again could be preached without political restraint.

As for science, the standard jab against the church is demonstrably false. Church leaders sponsored the building of astronomical observatories. Christian intellectuals developed the world’s first universities, in which the old ideas of Aristotle and the newer ideas of what we now call the “Middle Ages” were freely debated. When the Bishop of Paris condemned 219 statements from Aristotle’s works in 1277, the result was not so much censorship as freedom—university faculty and students now had space to develop alternatives to Aristotle’s ideas about physics and astronomy. But they preserved Aristotle’s logical

way of thinking, as did Martin Luther and Philipp Melancthon at Wittenberg during the 1500s.

In the late Middle Ages, universities cultivated a form of debate called the “disputation” that required the presenter to make a fair-minded presentation of both sides and then provide clear reasons why he favored one view over the other. Disputations fostered greater intellectual honesty and greater academic freedom than today’s universities, where “speech codes” and “political correctness” stifle true debate. Indeed, Luther’s 95 Theses and his Heidelberg Disputation came out of this Medieval approach to open inquiry. Martin Chemnitz’s treatise concerning the Lord’s Supper similarly followed the disputation model in order to compare Roman, Reformed, and Lutheran views, and to demonstrate with clear logic that the Lutheran teaching uniquely squares with Holy Scripture.

The Scientific Revolution followed on the heels of the Lutheran Reformation, preserving the best of Medieval intellectual life while also forging ahead with new methods of scientific experiment. Melancthon was especially encouraging of Copernican astronomy at the University of Wittenberg. Even the Roman Catholic Church likely would not have been so critical of Galileo had it not been for bad timing—church officials viewed him as another Luther and overreacted in the fanaticism of the Counter-Reformation.

So, is the church necessarily hostile to science? Certainly not. Christianity teaches that God created the world and that God gave people eyes to see and minds to think. Modern science was founded upon this doctrine of creation. When some scientists turn against their Creator, promoting evolutionary theories, then of course tensions emerge—but that’s not the fault of genuine science, nor the fault of biblical Christianity.

Christianity encourages science so long as scientists do not reject the Creator. Christianity supports the proper administration of justice, which sometimes (but certainly not always) occurred during the Inquisition. Christianity recognizes that war may be waged justly in self-defense (which, again, sometimes but not always was the case during the Crusades). But Christianity is also more than all these things.

Christianity should never be defined by whatever people who call themselves “Christians” happen to do, whether good or ill. Nor should Christianity be equated with virtuous living, though of course that is an expected fruit of faith. Christianity is founded not upon human actions, but rather upon the words and works of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose from the grave to win forgiveness for all people. That Gospel of redemption is the heart and soul of Christianity. Medieval hymns cherishing this Gospel message illuminated people’s hearts throughout the so-called “Dark Ages.” The same Bible-based lyrics enlighten us still today.

- Presenting evidence for the truth of Christianity
- Critiquing worldviews that oppose Christianity
- Fortifying believers with a proper interpretation of Holy Scripture
- Engaging unbelievers in conversations leading toward the Gospel proclamation of forgiveness in Christ



Websites:

Center for Apologetics and
Worldview Studies:
blc.edu/apologetics

ELS Evangelism Resources:
els.org/resources/evangelism

Medieval Hymnody Enlightens Any “Dark Age”

Author Unknown, 6th or 7th Century

*Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and cornerstone,
Chosen of the Lord and precious,
Binding all the Church in one,
Holy Zion’s helper ever,
And her confidence alone.* (ELH 8:1)

St. Theodulph of Orleans, 770–821

*All glory, laud and honor
To Thee, Redeemer, King,
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring.
Thou art the King of Israel,
Thou David’s royal Son,
Who in the Lord’s name comest,
The King and Blessed One.* (ELH 277:1)

John of Damascus, 696–754

*The day of resurrection,
Earth, tell it out abroad,
The Passover of gladness,
The Passover of God,
From death to life eternal,
From this world to the sky,
Our Christ hath brought us over
With hymns of victory.* (ELH 356:1)

Bernard of Clairvaux, 1090–1153

*O Jesus, King most wonderful,
Thou Conqueror renowned,
Thou Sweetness most ineffable,
In whom all joys are found!* (ELH 278:1)