

Lecture 12

The Twelfth Century Renaissance

History is often portrayed in terms of names, dates and places. However, history can also be described in terms not of a huge number of individual people but a small number of ethnic peoples—which are successively caught up in a lengthy unfolding drama.

Within the overall story of this planet, the last 2,000 years is one of the most exciting periods to understand. It can be seen as a five-act play, each act lasting four hundred years, each act ending in a renaissance of sorts, each portraying the expansion of the Biblical Kingdom of God from one cultural basin to another, the third of those 400-year supercenturies being our focus in this lesson.

In this period, the main peoples in addition to the Scandinavian sphere which is being invaded by the Gospel, are the Jewish Semites in whose midst the Kingdom or Rule of God was present for many centuries. Then came the Romans, representing both the Greek and Latin spheres, in whose midst the Kingdom was highlighted in the first 400 years. Finally, there are the Gothic peoples in whose midst the kingdom began earlier but expanded greatly in the previous 400 years, which ended up with the pinnacle of the Carolingian Renaissance. Perhaps the most influential people were the Celts who figured strongly in the second act.

Expansion of the Kingdom took place less dramatically or less sustainably into Eastern Europe, east as far as China and the Philippines and as far south as Ethiopia. But the new major actor in this third act in the main stream of the expanding Kingdom are the peoples—Vikings—which today we call Scandinavians.

In this third of five acts, we see the story speeding up with decisive interaction between Latin Roman, Gothic, Celtic and Viking peoples.

By 800 AD, the advance north of Islam was stopped. Perhaps one reason is that the Muslim leaders, already

conquerors of the Mediterranean high civilization, lacked interest in pushing further north into illiterate, “barbarian” territory.

In any case, by 800 the Gothic barbarians had definitely seen a great light. Now they had the towering figure of Charlemagne as their leader—godly, humble, scholarly—and hundreds if not thousands of schools for children were in place. The Celtic movement was in great shape. Charlemagne, and the continent, owe almost everything to it.

The most indigestible element on the continent was the relentless attacking of Charlemagne’s realm by Saxons still on the continent. Their brothers had earlier invaded Britain successfully and had become Christian to some extent. But the remainder on the continent were still pagan and very resistant. Charlemagne felt he had finally to deal very harshly with them, literally uprooting thousands and moving them way inland creating what today in Germany is called Saxony.

However, one other potentially disturbing factor was soon to appear. It is said that in the year 800, when Charlemagne was crowned emperor of the “Holy Roman Empire” down in Rome he looked out into the open sea and saw some Viking boats. Prophetically, he remarked that they were going to become a problem. And in our period in this lesson they certainly did become a problem.

What Charlemagne did not know was that already, at that very moment, 800 AD, Lindisfarne, a major monastic outpost off the eastern shore of northern England had already been ruthlessly sacked and the monks killed. This was to happen 13 more times across the decades.

The relative peace and quiet and composure of Ireland, Scotland, England and middle Europe was soon to be exploded, ravaged again and again for 250 years

by these cruel pirates from further north. Medieval chroniclers spoke of dead bodies in every direction. The English prayer book contained for centuries the phrase, “from the fury of the northmen, Oh Lord deliver us.”

Their devastation was difficult to oppose because they came by sea. Most of the monastic centers had been well defended from land attack, often backed up to the sea from which, until the Vikings, there had been no threat. Now they were suddenly vulnerable.

Vikings would appear without warning, unlike the fast traveling word of the slow advance of an army on land, sometimes in small numbers, increasingly in large numbers. They came intermittently and then began to stay, exacting payments from those whom they permitted to survive. Their expanding territory in England was called the area of “Danegeld” (gold for the Danes) thinking they were all Danes.

They were repulsed eventually south of London, by figures such as Alfred the Great, a seriously believing Anglo-Saxon chieftain who even promoted the translation of key documents from the prevailing Latin into the Germanic tongue of the Anglo-Saxons.

By 900 AD things were at a low point. Hundreds of both Celtic and Benedictine monasteries had been destroyed. Others had declined. Something new emerged called the Cluny renewal. At Cluny in south France in 910 a new determinedly Benedictine monastery was founded that soon achieved a unique status: it was ostensibly directly under the pope and could not be commandeered by local kings or bishops, as had been so often the case with other monastic centers once they attained enviable wealth.

The Cluny pattern proliferated fairly rapidly. Dozens and then hundreds of new and reformed Benedictine centers joined this new pattern.

Cluny, emphasizing worship, not work, developed a very high level of artistic and liturgical complexity. The Cluny center itself was rebuilt again and again until it became the most impressive center north of the Alps both physically and politically in the religious realm.

Art for God’s sake became central. Liturgical complexity demanded architectural elaboration. Mass came to take all day. The enormous and opulent “Cluny III” center was badly damaged in the French Revolution and is now a museum.

The most influential single feature of the Cluny reform was the idea that local bishops could not command their centers. This foreshadowed the massive turbulence of the “Investiture Controversy,” in which not just Cluny centers were freed from secular or local religious control, but, gradually, even the appointment of bishops would no longer be the right or at the approval of secular rulers. The later fight between Henry IV of France, the current Holy Roman Emperor, and the current pope meant bishops could lose their positions.

The Cluny pattern, coming earlier, was also more basic in one sense. It created a new kind of freedom which could be called regulation without administration. The pope was the regulator but not the administrator of the Cluny houses. This was somewhat theoretical since geographical distance greatly reduced actual authority. It amounted, however, to a recognition of local Abbots of monasteries as autonomous from local bishops of dioceses. The diocese was an overall umbrella of citizens in a given area whether they wanted to be included or not. The monastic center, by contrast, was very definitely an additional step for those who became members.

For some years I have been promoting two technical terms for these two different structures—modality and sodality. Membership in the church or family or community (modalities) is generally an automatic or at least a “benefit of the doubt” structure, while admission to membership in an “order” (a sodality) is a long and involved process in which no benefit of doubt is intended. In the modality the leader is dispensable. In the sodality the follower is dispensable.

The Cluny movement became the dominant monastic pattern until a strikingly new and even more influential pattern emerged about 200 years later—the Cistercians. Still Benedictine, they deliberately rejected the finery and endless and flowery worship of the Cluny movement. They differed also in the mother house having even greater control over all the other Cistercian centers. Laymen could become full members. Some of their centers eventually would be for women. This new movement expanded more rapidly and even more successfully than had the Cluny reform. Bernard of Clairvaux, author of the hymn “Jesus the very thought of Thee” was perhaps their most widely known and respected leader. But the Cistercians, too, eventually became extremely wealthy and somewhat bogged down.

Now appeared a further kind of disciplined way of life. The Benedictine “regula” or way of life pertained to monastic houses during centuries when parishes by comparison were very fragile and intermittent. As the Viking menace diminished, parishes and rectors thereof became more common and a “regula” was sought for rectors. What evolved is called, logically, “Clerks Regular” (in some cases, Canons Regular) which provided an accountable, disciplined pattern binding together priests who worked in different parishes.

However, by far the most significant mutation in “order” structure was what emerged at the very end of the period, not even gaining momentum until the early years after the year 1200 AD. I refer to the Friars—the Franciscans and the Dominicans. They were the first of a new breed of Catholic orders to venture forth into the highways and the byways—for one reason, Europe’s roads were better and safer by this time in history.

By the end of this third period (800-1200) the first two Crusades had already transpired. The first had conquered Jerusalem only to lose it again. The Crusaders had killed every living thing in the city. When the Muslims reconquered it 88 years later they again invited back both Jews and Christians, even the kind which had brutally taken the city earlier.

In addition to the beginning of the Crusades, and the Friars, this period also saw the emergence of the universities and the cathedrals.

Let me close by pointing out that world population began to rise much more steeply in this period. In an earlier lesson we looked at the phenomenon of “exponential growth” and saw how deceptive it is and yet how easy it is to calculate.

At this point the emphasis is not so much on the method of calculation or even the varied estimates of world population during this period but on the keen significance of population non-growth. Note that the population of the British Isles is estimated to have been one million in 440 AD, after three centuries of literacy, when Roman Britain was, with the Anglo-Saxon invasions, about to dive back to darkness. The population was still one million when, in this third period (1066 AD), William the Conqueror crossed the channel in another permanent conquest of England, introducing the Latin language tradition, which, mixed with the Germanic, became the beginnings of modern English. However, what does this lack of growth during 600 years imply?

The answer must be the unremitting presence of war and pestilence, both. Think of the millions of premature deaths in 600 years that would explain that non-growth! It was not a case of China-like government suppression of births, or the extensive infanticide in China. Medieval chroniclers, somewhat as today, took the attrition of pestilence (that is disease) as a “given.” It was something they had no means of combatting, being totally oblivious of germs.

Today, from one disease alone (cardiovascular disease—strokes and heart attacks) we lose as many citizens in the USA as we would if we were fighting 300 Iraqi wars. We spend a billion dollars a day patching people up who are attacked in this way. We spend virtually nothing in exploring root causes of cardiovascular disease. However, the effects of other diseases and the situation in non-western countries is often considered far worse. Nevertheless, Africa south of the Sahara has about the same population as the USA, yet here in the USA we lose 6,000 people per day to cardiovascular disease and cancer—the same number Africa loses per day to HIV/AIDS.

Deceptively, we spend an enormous amount on curing and avoiding disease—defensive measures. But there is virtually no money in finding the root causes, the origins, the pathogens behind most of our diseases. Indeed, we have been so long deceived (especially back in the 12th century) that the entire history of medicine is characterized by the nearly continuous but yet unexpected revelation that most major diseases are not conditions but rather infections.

Take for example, tuberculosis. It was for centuries assumed to be the result of people being exposed to conditions of dampness and cold. The Black plague which we will look at in the next period was the result of something no one suspected—fleas. Yellow fever was a total mystery. So was malaria, etc. Now, belatedly, in rapid fire, we are discovering that ulcers, heart disease, cancer, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimers and schizophrenia are all infections, not conditions. No longer are duodenal ulcers assumed to result from stress or spicy foods.

But to this day there is no money for exploring disease origins. Big money comes from sick and desperate people who want a cure, not a general solution.

These comments are not an indictment of our massive medical/pharmaceutical industry, which is responding to the cries of sick people. It is to point out the degree

to which in both the 12th century and today we are either unaware of the nature of disease origins or we are doing little about them.

Historically, however, mere cleanliness protects us from much illness. Proper diet also does. So do proper exercise and sleep. In this way historical “pestilence” has significantly diminished since 1066 AD. However, the history of Christianity has largely been a concern for getting people into heaven, not that of destroying the works of Satan.

The monastic movement went clearly beyond a focus on the next world. The medieval bridges, roads, buildings, education, and governmental structures were extensively the labors of those who made the second step into the orders. Many of the early insights into genetics, astronomy, and science in general, came from the orders. The periodic table of elements was first elaborated by Jesuits.

However, the keen thinkers of that time were groping their way in thick darkness. Back then we did not realize the extent to which we were up against an intelligent enemy. We did not have any valid clues as to the infectious origins of disease. The Bible gives many very

intelligent rules for avoiding disease. But until recently God could not, Jesus could not, Calvin and Luther could not talk about microbiological enemies which they could not see with the naked eye.

Today we have learned how to see such things, even entities as small as viruses. But we lack a theology for fighting them. And less than one percent of medical money goes to the discovery of disease origins. In the 12th century people were unwillingly blind to such things. Today we are willingly blind to them. Our theology has not grown with our knowledge. Our missions are today relatively superficial. In mission fields around the world we have spread vital and necessary hope of heaven. We have little theology that addresses the roots of poverty. We can “save” people for heaven but we are not effectively saving them from grinding poverty.

We will take this up again in the next period—where the Black plague will not allow us to avoid it. However, looking back on the Third Period we see a gigantic step forward in knowledge of God’s creation, His purposes for His human followers and, incrementally, the domination of His Kingdom over war and pestilence—population began to rise.