

Why Christendom Matters

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In light on the modern secular interpretation of history why would historical concepts of Christendom matter? The simple answer here is that it matters because it mattered greatly to those who lived and guided the events that we now read about and study. This is true not just of the Catholic believer and the Protestant reformer but is equally true of the Enlightenment skeptic. The concept of Christendom isn't limited to religious faith but extends to societies, cultures, and economies that produced the western world and still affects us today.

Europe in the 1500's was a very different place from the modern world in some fundamental ways. Communication prior to the printing press was principally oral but over the next hundred years would move rapidly to being textual. Crop yields, although consistently improving lacked several now common items that would come from the new world and would facilitate larger and denser populations. The nation states that are generally assumed by most to have existed since the beginning of civilization didn't exist at all. As late as the 16th century, serfdom, a form of pseudo-slavery associated with the feudal system, was still common in Europe and especially Eastern Europe. The serf lacked freedom of movement and was bound to the land as opposed to a master, as is the case in chattel slavery, yet feudalism at its inception created a structure that facilitated the development of civilization (1 p. ch. 8). The conditions of serfdom did vary by time, place, and numerous other factors. Muslim raids on coastal towns to harvest both goods and people left the European people more likely to wind up as slave than master. This continued as late as the 18th century it is estimated that at least 1.2 million Europeans met this fate (2 p. i). Finally the romantic notions of a highly refined and Christianized society were simply false. Yet there was goodness and decency and that hope for the most part emanated from the church.

For several centuries stretching from the "*enlightenment*" and reformation era until modern times, Christendom has been assailed by anti-religious philosophers and protestant reformers with little opposition or analysis to the point where it has created both a false narrative and false collective historical memories. Some of the sources, as we shall see, were beyond dubious at their beginnings but gradually became accepted academic teaching for generations. Within protestant evangelical Christianity in America, the Catholic Church has been seen until fairly recently as a fundamental perversion of the early church that was entirely and consistently corrupt, oppressed people and slowed the development of civilization, was and is fundamentally anti-science, and was anti-American (3). It has also been stressed within Evangelicalism that Catholicism is a works based religion. A devout Catholic with an understanding of their faith would contest this point and the question really is somewhat nuanced both theologically and culturally and ripples across history. The reformation is seen as a sort of awakening that created a broad grass roots spiritual revival across Europe but this also simply didn't happen (3 pp. 7-20).

Going back to the beginnings of Christendom, the Catholic Church evolved gradually from the early church prior to the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity, and throughout its history generally represented majority opinions and interpretations (4 pp. 904-06). Even some of the more controversial

or questionable teachings like the doctrine of celibacy for church workers was definitely present in the early church as derived from the writings of Paul and documented in the writings of Eusebius (5). Some other controversial teachings like purgatory evolved from the Jewish Talmud and were common in the early church. Since becoming an official religion in the Roman Empire, there was a political church but there was also a pious church maintained largely through the monastery system that constrained and sometimes controlled the political church (6 pp. 189-91). In an institution as large as the church it is always possible to find anecdotal evidence to support any case someone would like to make but generalizations must be based first on what can be quantified and second on what appears to have been most common.

The Catholic Church maintained some basic social structure after Rome gradually collapsed (7 pp. 6-12) and was a common cultural bond well before the development of nation states when society was tribal and/or feudal. The monks cleared rocks and debris from swamps creating flowing and navigable rivers, they maintained writing and literature, and spread practical technical knowledge that maintained and advanced standards of living in medieval times (7 pp. 25-40). The notion that they were against science was largely if not entirely based on the Galileo story of the heliocentric solar system. This story is all most people are aware of and it is somewhat more involved than it is portrayed but this is the lone piece of evidence to make the point. (7 pp. 67-74)

In Christendom, the church, while lacking direct political power, was in effect a federation over what were sometimes as many as a thousand separate political units some of which could be most accurately described as "*statelets*". The Church maintained a comprehensive structure around geographical parishes and dioceses managed by pastors and bishops and ruled over by the Vatican. There were close ties between the church and ruling elite in many cases yet a separation was observed (3 pp. p. 45-46). The church brought together three factors that made Europe. One was the universal church based in Rome that was the cultural cement which bound Western Civilization together as it developed. The second was the Greco-Roman tradition of liberty under the law that survived as a concept as Rome gradually collapsed. The third, which was also very important but not as obvious, was the Germanic concept of honor of warriors and respect for personal and decentralized authority. (1 p. Ch. 8)

After the fall of Rome, European society largely consisted of feudal estates run by people from the aristocracy (warrior class at the time) who ruled over serfs, who were roughly equivalent to tenant farmers tied to the land. There was initially little specialization or industry except for the monastery system which developed industries that produced and distributed products. Through this, the church became very wealthy but it was largely earned and not simply a matter of claiming land and charging rents. (6 pp. 216-20)

Wars happened but on a very small scale compared to what was to follow after the collapse of Christendom and were fought with small professional armies for limited objectives. At the battle of Hastings in 1066, which resulted in the Norman conquest of England and was a relatively large encounter by standards of the time, 10,000 Normans overcame 7,000 English while the population of England was about 2.5 million. Larger wars involved common defense against outside invaders such as

the Muslims, the Magyars and the Mongols where Christian armies united to ward off an external threat. (3 pp. 46-47)

For about 100 years after the death of Mohammed, Islam expanded rapidly through military conquests at the expense of Byzantine outposts in the Middle East, Coptic Christians in Egypt, Visigoths in Spain, Persians (Zoroastrians), and in modern India (1 p. ch. 9) (6 pp. 95-100) (8 pp. 12-23). The myth of a superior Arabic culture came from knowledge and technology of the conquered peoples (nimmini) and in most cases never did really assimilate into Arabic culture or society. For example, the navies of Islam were built by Christians and Jews in Alexandria and frequently operated by mercenaries (8 pp. p. 56-59). They had some success initially by picking the battles carefully but when they came against Byzantine naval might, which incorporated Roman fire; in their own waters they were utterly annihilated. Likewise when they came against the forces assembled by Charles Martel in modern France with superior weaponry and tactics, they were routed (8 pp. 39-43). The advance of Islam was halted dead in its tract by the mid 800's, they never controlled the Mediterranean, or had any sort of cultural or technological superiority. The Crusades, which are portrayed as a sort of early imperialism, were actually all defensive or retaliatory for crimes against Christian pilgrims (there were a large and steady flow of these) and were trivial compared to the many attempts by the forces of Islam to overrun Europe. Christendom held off external invaders in large part due to more advanced technology which was, in turn, closely linked to a world view that made the physical world understandable.

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