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978-1-107-62414-6 - An Essay on Western Civilisation in its Economic Aspects
(Mediaeval and Modern Times)

W. Cunningham

Excerpt

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WESTERN CIVILISATION.

INTRODUCTION.

71. IN the first volume of this book an attempt has been made to trace the progress of material civilisation in the ancient world, from its beginnings in Egypt and Phoenicia to its highest development in the Roman Empire under Hadrian.

**Mediaeval,
Christendom
as an organ-
ised Society.**

The influences which sapped the vigour of this great polity and left it powerless before the attacks of the barbarians, have also been described; and we have seen that though a portion of the ancient empire maintained a successful resistance at Constantinople, the Teutonic invasion shook or destroyed the whole fabric of society in the western parts of Europe. The military organisation proved insufficient; the defenceless cities became the prey of barbarian conquerors; what had once been a well administered empire was broken into fragments, and the social order was reduced to chaos. The Norse and Danish invasions in the ninth and tenth centuries were the last of the successive inundations to which Western Europe was exposed¹: and when they had ceased, we may note the emergence of a new civilisation which was curiously like and curiously different from the old empire that had so completely succumbed.

¹ Cunningham, *Alien Immigrants*, p. 5.

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The very name by which we speak of this new social system calls attention to its Christianity as the trait which distinguishes it most clearly from the civilisation of the ancient world. The Roman Empire had been created by military prowess; the military organisation, with the military roads which connected its various provinces, was the effective element by which it was maintained. Christendom on the contrary, under its spiritual head the Pope, expended its material energies in the raising of magnificent churches and the endowing of religious houses; it devoted its resources to aggressive struggles with the infidel. Religious aspirations and motives found expression in the magnificent buildings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; these ideas and sentiments permeated all social institutions; though they lie on the surface they were not merely superficial. War was practically unintermittent in the early middle ages, but it was rarely a combining force; and however much the swords of the Franks may have contributed to the rise of the papacy, the secret of its power lay far deeper. It was not by military force, but by religious authority, that the foundations of civilised society were laid anew in the dark ages; in so far as old institutions reappear in mediaeval Christendom, they were for the most part modified or remodelled under religious influence.

In looking back from the present time, when political and religious differences have done so much to accentuate the divisions of Christendom, we are apt to forget its solidarity in bygone days. In the thirteenth century the ecclesiastical organisation gave a unity to the social structure throughout the whole of Western Europe; over the area in which the Pope was recognised as the spiritual and the Emperor as the temporal Vicar of God, political and racial differences were relatively less important. For economic purposes it is scarcely necessary to distinguish different countries from one another in the thirteenth century, for there were fewer barriers to social intercourse within the limits of Christendom than

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we meet to-day. Latin was the only literary language, and the student who passed from one University to another found himself everywhere at home, in the method of teaching and the course of study to be pursued. The merchant who visited a foreign port, or the artisan who sojourned in a distant town, was confronted with restrictions or aided by facilities which were familiar enough to him at home. There was little in the churches of different parts of Christendom to distract the worshipper by unaccustomed rites. Similar ecclesiastical canons, and similar law merchant prevailed over large areas, where very different admixtures of civil and barbaric laws were in vogue. Christendom, though broken into so many fragments politically, was one organised society, for all the purposes of economic life, because there was such free intercommunication between its parts. From this point of view we may treat it as a clearly marked and distinct civilisation, which succeeded to the place that the Roman Empire had occupied.

Geographically they were not coincident. Western Christendom, in the thirteenth century, contained much of the territory which had been included in the Roman Empire, as it was fortified and beautified by Hadrian; but much also had fallen away. The far East and Africa had been entirely, and Spain had been partially lost, as a result of the Mohammedan invasion; and the Greek lands maintained that independence of Rome which they had achieved when Constantine founded his capital on the shores of the Bosphorus. On the other hand, there had been some acquisitions; there had been peaceful conquests of the Cross in Ireland and Scotland, Iceland, Denmark, and the Scandinavian Peninsula; and militant Christianity had at length prevailed in Saxony and Lithuania. There had thus been an expansion of Christendom on the north beyond the limits which Roman strategy had laid down for the Empire.

There was throughout this area one social system, and

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it is possible to indicate the general course of its history as a whole ; but it is obvious that the rate of economic progress has not been similar and simultaneous in all these Christian lands, especially when we take account of the differences in their physical conditions and in their inhabitants. We are not concerned with the separate industrial development of each part by itself, but only with each, in turn, in so far as it was at any moment typical of changes which have taken place in Christendom as a whole. The various countries of Christendom did not start from the same point, and did not run the same course ; at one time France, at another Italy, at another Germany or Flanders took the lead ; but it is not uninteresting to note the well-marked and distinct stages to which different peoples attained at different times ; some were pioneers, and some were imitators at each step in advance, but still the path of progress was similar for all.

The development of civilisation in ancient times had been carried on by a succession of races which were mutually exclusive and hostile ; while the advance in the mediaeval and modern world has been due to social elements, which though distinct yet recognised a common underlying affinity¹. The most distant places shared more or less in the movements which were at work elsewhere ; for the magnificent churches at Kirkwall, Trondhjem and Upsala show that even the outlying districts of Christendom had their part in its artistic and industrial work in the thirteenth century ; these ancient monuments testify to an intercourse which never entirely ceased. The peoples of Western Christendom have formed one civilisation,—not because their conditions and history have been identical, but because, different as they were and are, the intercourse between them has been so frequent and the

¹ Their common Christianity gave a consciousness of affinity which was not natural to the city life of the ancient world (Fustel de Coulanges, *La Cité Antique*, I. II. c. 4, *De l'esprit municipal*), and which united the whole of Western Europe in antagonism to the Mohammedan world.

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interconnection so close, that changes which occurred in one have necessarily reacted upon all the others¹.

72. The ruins of the Roman Empire were drawn on, in many ways, for the reconstruction of civilised society in the West. The very tradition of Imperial power exercised an immense influence as a unifying idea², which survived to give definite shape to the ambitions of Charles, and facilitated the general recognition of a central authority at Rome. These political influences are the most obvious, but others, which are more difficult to trace, are hardly less important; we find the signs of a new social order, especially when we are looking at its material side, not only in the one great centre of administration³, but in many separate localities, where circumstances afforded an opportunity for the beginnings of progress. There was no province from which the barbarians effaced all traces of Roman occupation. Even in Britain, the cherry trees and quickset hedges, the wheat and the cattle, suggest the tradition of Roman agriculture⁴; while the roads, canals, and buildings afforded models that were followed in subsequent times. In some parts of Northern France the imperial influence had been comparatively superficial⁵, but it was not obliterated; when some degree of order was once more secured there were ample materials which could be utilised in the new social structure. The physical relics of Roman civilisation remained

The Eco-
nomic debt to
Ancient Rome.

¹ On the importance of intercourse as a characteristic of Western Civilisation, see Volume I. p. 3.

² Bryce, *Holy Roman Empire* (1875), pp. 24, 72.

³ The beginnings of civilised life in northern Britain, round the Columban churches, lay outside the influence of the Bishop of Rome; nor was it from Rome that the impulse came for the work of S. Columbanus in Burgundy and Switzerland, and of S. Boniface in Germany.

⁴ Pearson, *England during Early and Middle Ages*, I. 56; Coote, *A Neglected Fact of English History*, p. 53; Hughes, *Royal Agricultural Journal*, 3rd Ser., v. 561.

⁵ Dareste de la Chavanne. *Histoire des Classes Agricoles*, p. 51.

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throughout the greater part of the West ; and in some cities vestiges of Roman administration were maintained. There was a great heritage of manual skill and mechanical arts which had been slowly built up in Egypt, Phoenicia, Greece, and Carthage, and which was incorporated in the culture which the Romans diffused ; and it may be doubted if any of the industrial arts as known and practised by the Romans was wholly lost in the West. There were, besides, forms of economic life which reappeared when circumstances admitted of the revival ; there was no need to invent them anew. The organisation of the mediaeval estate has its analogue in the Roman villa ; the mediaeval city, with its guilds, is the reproduction¹ of the Roman town and its *collegia*. The fiscal and the judicial systems of the different lands were affected by the methods of Imperial Rome. In some regions there was a revivifying of institutions that had decayed but were not extinct ; in others there was the direct imitation or transplanting of methods that had survived elsewhere ; but in all parts of Christendom there is enough to remind us of the fact that the new civilisation was raised on the ruins of the Roman Empire. Nor need it surprise us that the revival followed a course that was somewhat parallel to the original growth ; the transference from natural to money economy, the organisation first of passive and then of active commerce, the establishment of fairs and the regulation of industry recurred in mediaeval times, just as we have already traced them in the ancient world ; there has been a “natural progress of opulence” which can be discerned both in ancient and in mediaeval society. So far as industrial arts and the great types of social and economic organisation are concerned, the new development followed closely on the lines of the old.

73. It is true, then, that the debt of Christendom to ancient Rome is very deep, and that centuries of gradual growth

¹ Even though continuity can only be proved in some few cities of Italy ; see below, p. 24 n.

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were required before mediaeval could vie with ancient civilisation in the external signs of material prosperity ; but it would be a mistake to suppose that the new society was a mere reproduction of the old ; it differed in every single feature. It has been pointed out above¹ that though the Phoenicians were so highly skilled in all industrial and commercial arts, the character of Greek civilisation was different from that of their Semitic instructors ; there was a similar contrast between the Roman Empire and mediaeval Christendom ; a difference not in skill or in organisation merely, but in the whole spirit of the civilisation. Though this element is very important, it is so subtle that analysis does not readily detect it, and there is some difficulty in describing it ; but the best that the Greeks had attained may be taken as the starting-point from which the new advance began. The Greek regarded material wealth as a means to an end, and as offering opportunities for the cultured life of free men in a City-State. A high respect for the dignity of man and the possibilities of human nature as essentially political, dominated his attitude towards the material world, and the pursuit of agriculture, commerce and industry. Christian teaching carried this Greek conception of the supreme worth of human life much farther by presenting it in its supernatural aspects. The doctrine of the Incarnation² asserted that the human body had afforded

The Christian compared with the Greek and Roman attitude towards material opportunities and resources. The reconstruction and remodelling of society.

¹ Volume I. pp. 71, 98.

² There is no side of human life which may not have a bearing on economic changes (Cunningham, *Growth of English Industry and Commerce*, I. p. 7), and though it is rarely necessary to call attention to philosophical beliefs or religious convictions, we are forced back on them if we attempt to describe the spirit of a people or of an age. Thus, as Professor Bury points out (*Later Roman Empire*, I. p. 188), the victory of Athanasianism over Arianism was of world-historical importance. "The very essence of Christianity was at stake. For the special power of Christianity depended on the idea of Christ, and the doctrine of Arius

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an adequate medium for the manifestation of the divine nature; the doctrine of the Resurrection held out a sure and certain hope of personal immortality for the human soul. Christianity thus involved a higher view of all human life, as such, than the Greeks had asserted of the noblest members of a selected race. The supreme dignity of man as man was set forth by Christian teaching, and the conscious and habitual subordination of material things to human ideals and aspirations was carried farther than it had ever been before, since man came to be regarded not only as a rational, but as an immortal being, and as one who has a place in a supernatural order.

One of the gravest defects of the Roman Empire lay in the fact that its system left little scope for individual aims, and tended to check the energy of capitalists and labourers alike¹. But Christian teaching opened up an unending prospect before the individual personally, and encouraged him to diligence and activity by an eternal hope. Nor did such concentration of thought on a life beyond the grave necessarily divert attention from secular duties²; Christianity did not disparage them, but set them in a new light, and brought out new motives for taking them earnestly. The Christian monk, like the Roman slave, was deprived of civil rights, and was absolutely at the beck and call of his superior.

tended to depress Christ, as less than God, a tendency which, if it had prevailed, would have ultimately banished Christ" from the world. The tendency of much Eastern speculation was to exalt the divine at the expense of the human, and thus to refuse to accord to what is merely human its true dignity and value. See also Gwatkin, *Studies in Arianism*, 264.

¹ Volume I. pp. 189, 192.

² The legend, which was popularised by Robertson (*State of Europe in Charles V.* I. p. 26) and Michelet (*Histoire de France*, II. p. 132), of the general disregard of mundane interests and consequent shock to society at the close of the tenth century from the prevalence of the belief in the approaching end of the world, has been recently shown to be entirely contrary to the truth. Pfister, *Études sur le règne de Robert le Pieux* in *Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes Études*, Fasc. 64^{me}, p. 322.

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But there was no degradation in monastic obedience, since it was voluntarily undertaken by a freeman as a discipline through which he might attain the noblest destiny.

The acceptance of this higher view of the dignity of human life as immortal, was followed by a fuller recognition of personal responsibility. Ancient philosophy had seen that Man is the master of material things; but Christianity introduced a new sense of duty in regard to the manner of using them. The new teaching could not approve the wasting of material wealth in the mere perpetuation of regal pride, in pandering to the gratification of effeminate luxury, or in pauperising an idle and brutal rabble by providing them with bread and diversion. The wealth of the old world had been wasted in this fashion; provinces had been despoiled and ruined and their resources exhausted rather than developed; and Christian teachers were forced to protest against any employment of wealth that disregarded the glory of God and the good of man¹.

This then was the characteristic difference between the ancient civilisation and the new order which was beginning to flourish in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It is of course true that these principles were very imperfectly realised, but in so far as they had any influence at all on actual life, they help us to understand the nature and scope of the political contrasts between the Pagan Empire and Latin Christendom. A capricious and arbitrary human ruler had been hailed with divine honours in ancient times; in the Middle Ages the supremacy of Eternal and Supernatural Authority over all human beings who might exercise magisterial power was maintained; the contrast is exemplified in the controversy between the Popes and Emperors regarding Investitures. The Christian doctrine of price, and Christian condemnation of gain at the expense of another man, affected all the mediaeval organisation of municipal life and regulation of inter-municipal commerce,

¹ S. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa*, ii^a ii^{ae}, q. 66, art. 2, 7.

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and introduced marked contrasts to the conditions of business in ancient cities. The Christian appreciation of the duty of work rendered the lot of the mediaeval villain a very different thing from that of the slave in the ancient empire. The responsibility of proprietors, like the responsibility of princes, was so far insisted on as to place substantial checks on tyranny of every kind. For these principles were not mere pious opinions but effective maxims in practical life. Owing to the circumstances in which the vestiges of Roman civilisation were locally maintained and the foundations of the new society were laid¹, there was ample opportunity for Christian teaching and example to have a marked influence on its development.

74. When measured by strictly economic criteria, it may be doubted whether the civilisation of the thirteenth century had made any advance on that of the Roman Empire in its best days; in the fourteenth century, the Black Death caused a shock to society from which it only slowly recovered, and in the latter part of the fifteenth century Europe was still seeking for inspiration by looking to the past and making closer acquaintance with the masterpieces of ancient literature and art. It was only with the close of the fifteenth century that Western Christendom obviously reached a stage of material progress beyond that to which the Romans had attained². The discovery of America and of the new route to the East Indies revolutionised men's ideas as to the surface of the globe, and

¹ The old order was not completely subverted at Constantinople, and ancient civilisation, with many of its inherent defects, survived in the East; society there had a veneer of Christian teaching applied to it, but it was not completely recast under Christian guidance. The church in the East was to a considerable extent a department of state under imperial control (Bury, *History of Later Roman Empire*, I. 105, 186; Finlay, *History of Greece*, I. 196), though there were indirect checks upon the Emperor (Finlay, *op. cit.* 188).

² For some qualifications see below on the beginnings of capital and credit, p. 169.