

The Waning Middle Ages

“The grass withers” (from Isaiah 40:8)... the waning of the Middle Ages. This prayer comes from the late Middle Ages, which is the period covered by this lesson. It is from a man named Heinrich Von Laufenberg. He lived in the 15th century. I do not actually know anything about this man except that he wrote this prayer. It is a very wonderful prayer and very appropriate. We will use this as we begin this lesson. Let us pray.

“Lord, Jesus Christ, our Lord most dear, as Thou wast once an infant here, so give this child of Thine, we pray, Thy grace and blessing day by day. Amen.”

I want to start with the idea of the medieval synthesis. I think one of the most astounding things about the third 500 years of Christian years that we have been studying is this synthesis. It is a coming together of Christ and culture, theology and philosophy, faith and learning. It is a harmony of life that brought the sacred and the secular together in culture in Europe. It is something we have not experienced in history since then. It is hard for us to know exactly how it would have been to have lived in that culture when we live in a culture that is so fractured. In the medieval period there was a coming together, a synthesis. Let me illustrate it in three ways: a book of theology, a book of poetry, and the example of the architecture of the cathedrals.

First let me talk about a book from theology. That has to be Thomas Aquinas and the *Summa Theologiae*. It is the great summa of Thomas in which all learning is united to the devotion of Christ and the presentation of His truth. You can think of the *Summa* as a great building, a magnificent structure. It is like one of those wonderful gothic cathedrals rising to the praise and glory of God.

As you move over into poetry, the great book is *The Divine Comedy* by Dante. It is a vision of divine order and heavenly beauty. It incorporates everything on earth, in hell, in purgatory, and in heaven. I trust that you will read *The Divine Comedy*. If you have not, you have probably at least read portions of it. Read it again. There is an illustration of Dante with the *Comedy*, his book, being depicted. It is not an easy book to read. But as you read it you will become more at home in the Middle Ages than anything else you can do. Read it in Dorothy Sayers’ translation. There are many translations of *The Divine Comedy*, but I think the one by Dorothy Sayers is the best. The footnotes from Dorothy Sayers are by far the best of any of the editors and translators of *The Divine Comedy*. Dorothy Sayers was a very competent theologian. She is more noted today for the *Lord Peter Wimsey Stories*, *The Nine Tailors*, *Murder Must Advertise*, and *The Five Red Herrings*. I have read them many times because I can never find any detective stories quite up to Dorothy Sayers. So I keep rereading her stories. But she wrote those stories to make money so that she could translate *The Divine Comedy* into English and do the work on the footnotes.

The third illustration is the glory of the cathedrals. In Thomas Aquinas there is a synthesis, in Dante there is a coming together of many things. The cathedrals illustrate the same point. Our textbook says, “The final outcome was and still is impressive. Stones seemed to take flight and rise to heaven. The entire building, inside and out, was a book in which the mysteries of faith and all creation were reflected.” Perhaps you have seen the cathedrals and you know something of the beauty and significance of those great constructions. For instance, the cathedral in France at Chartres has its twin towers pointing upward to heaven. This is certainly God-directed architecture in contrast with the chapel in Florence, which is an indication of renaissance- or humanistic-style of architecture. You enter the cathedral and your eyes and spirit are immediately lifted up. The cathedral, like the *Summa* and like *The Divine*

Comedy, is a work in which learning, understanding, theology, Old Testament, New Testament, and often many other sources of knowledge are brought together. There are at least 1,000 separate statues carved into Chartres Cathedral. You can see a few of those in the main west entrance with its three portals representing the Trinity. Everything stands for something in a cathedral. By walking through one of those cathedrals, you can be impressed with the significance of this medieval synthesis. Dr. Hans Bayer is a professor at this seminary, and he has written in his testimony, “During the first 17 years of my life, there was little conscious interest and concern to consider the existence of God. Increasingly, however, I became curious about transcendent realities which might underlie the reality perceived by natural senses. A significant factor in this development was the study of the history, architecture, and message of the Chartres Cathedral in France. As a result, I began theological studies out of mere curiosity.” So Hans Bayer’s spiritual pilgrimage was begun and inspired by a visit to this church. That is a very interesting and important statement.

We are talking about the medieval synthesis. There is another picture on the cover from *Christian History Magazine*, Issue 49. This issue was called, “Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages.” It shows the bishop blessing the Linden Fair in France. The bishop is in the church in the center of everything. Life is surrounding the church: selling, people practicing various crafts, couples getting together and sharing with one another, and all kinds of activity. Right in the center of it all is the church. It is a coming together of life in the Middle Ages. That was the 13th century. But it was not long before the synthesis began to break apart.

As we look at the very end of the Middle Ages, the last lesson before we move next semester into the Reformation of the 16th century, we have to think of the breakup of the medieval synthesis. The Reformation came, not at the point of the height of the medieval world, but during the period called the waning of the Middle Ages. There are three theologians of significance. The first one is a transitional figure who can belong to the earlier period but transitions into the later period. Then there are two figures who are clearly in the later period. They are late medieval theologians.

The first theologian is John Duns Scotus. He was a Scottish, Franciscan scholastic theologian. He was in many ways like Thomas Aquinas, following the teaching of Aquinas. In other ways he strikes out on his own. He lived in different places. On his tomb in Cologne, Germany, are the words, “Scotland gave birth to me, England received me, France taught me, Cologne retains me.” He was born in Scotland and died in Germany. His contemporaries called him the Subtle Doctor. Once you have a great theologian like Thomas Aquinas then about all you can do is refine some of the small points after Thomas. The same thing happened after Calvin. The same thing happened after Carl Barth. Theologians became more precise in attempting to refine and clarify the teachings of the master. Others, particularly the later humanists who had very little sympathy or patience for scholasticism, found the theology of Duns Scotus too subtle, too dense, and too obscure. It is interesting that we get the word “dunce” from Duns. John Duns Scotus. He was not a dunce in the sense that we use the word. He was very brilliant. He was so brilliant that people thought he was stupid. They did not understand what he was saying. So that word comes into English curiously from this brilliant man who was not at all a dunce.

William of Occam was a true late medieval theologian. He was an English Franciscan. He got into a lot of trouble with the church because he was in the strict movement of the Franciscans. The Franciscans had divided into Franciscans who felt it was appropriate for the order to own property and Franciscans who insisted on the absolute rule of Francis, which was not to own anything. William of Occam was of the belief not to own anything. He faced the excommunication of the pope over that issue. William was not loath to criticize the pope either. One of the famous things from William of Occam is what is called Occam’s Razor. We read about that in our text, and perhaps you have heard about it. It is a principle in

philosophy and theology that Occam expressed in various ways. He said, “Whatever can be done with fewer assumptions is done in vain with more.” If you can drop out some things, drop them out and do not add them. The way I would translate that is “Keep it simple.” Just like a man shaves off his beard because it is not needed, so the Occamist is shaving off all these principles, attitudes, and concepts that are not needed. We will see in a few minutes what some of those were.

Gabriel Biel is called the last of the scholastics. He was German, a member of the Brothers of Common Life, and a teacher of Luther. I wanted to get those three names before you. Then we will talk about late medieval theology. It comes out of these late medieval theologians.

Theology became divided into two types of theology. There was the *via antiqua*, the old way, and the *via moderna*, the new way. By the time just before the Reformation, there were theologians in both camps. There were old way theologians and there are new way theologians. The turning point was in 1350. Paul Tilley calls it the turning point in the history of Western thought. We will answer why it is so important and what happened by looking at three points. We will look at voluntarism, nominalism, and how salvation was understood.

Voluntarism is the view that developed in the *via moderna*, the late medieval theology. It is the view that the divine will take precedence over the divine intellect. The primary characteristic of God that people used to think about was the divine intellect, what God knows and how He knows. They focused on God’s rationality. In Thomas Aquinas you get a theology that is based on the rationality of God. He gives us minds so that we can understand Him. We cannot exhaust Him or understand Him completely, but there is a nice fit between what God is and how He made people. There is a fit in how God acts and thinks and how we can understand how God acts and thinks. That view was challenged by voluntarism, which means that the divine will becomes primary. If you are going to think about God, do not think first about God’s intellect. Think about God’s will, what He chooses to do. That shift took place so that the divine will became the heart of theology over the divine intellect. Then suddenly God appeared to be not so knowable as He was in the theology of the *via antiqua*. There were theistic proofs and other ways in which we can know God and understand Him. The old way said, “Can we prove by human reason that God exists?” The answer was, yes, even by human reason we can prove that God exists. It makes sense for us to believe that God exists. There are the five theistic arguments; there was the ontological proof of Anselm.

The modern way, though, said that we cannot, by thinking, studying, and developing arguments, prove that God exists. God is unknowable. That might seem to lead into agnosticism, but it does not. The modern way said that we do know God, but we only know Him by faith in the Bible. We do not know Him by anything that we can do by human rationality. We can know a lot of other things: science, history. But we cannot know God. There are two worlds: the world of rationality and the world of faith. Those two came together in Thomas Aquinas in this great medieval synthesis. They were not the same, but they supported each other. Now they are pulled apart. You have one world on one side, which is the world you live in. It is science and history. Then there is the world of faith, which you believe and accept on authority. Those two worlds do not touch. In Thomas Aquinas, they not only touch, but they come close together even though they do not merge completely.

The other point of voluntarism is that God should be defined as absolute power. This means God does anything He chooses to do. Why does God do what He does? The old way would say that God wills something because that is right, good, reasonable, and it makes sense. *Cur deus homo*. The incarnation comes because of human sin and the necessity for a divine savior. So there has to be a God-man. The God-man comes and He provides the atonement. Only God could provide this, but only man could pay

it. You can see how that makes sense. But the new way said that God wills something because He wills it. There is no reason for the divine will other than the divine will. God did not have to save people through the incarnation of Christ. He chose to do it what way, but He could have done it any way that He chose. There was not just one way; there were an infinite number of ways.

Volunterism in the *via moderna* taught that the divine will takes precedence over the divine intellect. It undermined rational arguments of the knowledge of God. It is not that God is hidden like the mystics said; it is that God is unpredictable. God can do anything He chooses to do. All sorts of illustrations were brought forth to try to illustrate this point, some absurd, some thoughtful. There was not complete confusion, though, because the *via moderna* theologians were not heretics. They said they believed, but they believed on the basis of sheer revelation and faith in the Bible. They could not understand or figure it out. It is not faith seeking understanding. It is just faith believing. Understanding comes in the other world; we understand science and other things. We can understand things there. We do not understand anything with God; we just accept it and believe it. The result that you see is a breach between faith and authority on the one hand and reason on the other hand. You live in two worlds. In the time of the medieval synthesis, there was no division between those two worlds. You could think and believe at the same time. Now you must think rationally in one world, but in the other world you must accept and believe. The result is that what we know and what we believe, those two worlds, are being pulled apart. There was a secular-religious division. The *via moderna* theologians were not saying not to be religious. They said how you can be religious and how you live the rest of your life. Kenneth Clark, in the book *Civilization*, says, "Medieval man could see things very clearly, but he believed that these appearances should be considered as nothing more than symbols or tokens of an ideal order which was the only true reality." That leads us into another point, which is nominalism. Volunterism, as we have talked about, is the view that the divine will takes precedence over the divine intellect.

Now we are going to talk about nominalism. "Medieval man could see things very clearly, but he believed that these appearances should be considered as nothing more than symbols or tokens of an ideal order which was the only true reality." The second emphasis of the *via moderna* was nominalism, to challenge the realism of that quotation from Kenneth Clark. Realism puts an emphasis on the importance of universals. There is a universal concept, and individual things adhere to that universal concept. It is important to know the concept and to understand the concept. It is not so important to study the individual things. They just make up the universals. Universals are real; that is realism. It is ideas, universals, and ideal order. Nominalism would challenge that. The nominalist and medieval theologians like Occam would say universals are just words. They are just figures of speech. They are not real; they exist only in the human mind. They are just names. Realism says these universal concepts are real. Nominalism says these universal concepts are just names.

Let me illustrate that with pigs. There is a realist pig and a nominalist pig contemplating an ear of corn. The realist pig sees the ear of corn, and he says, "That is part, just one individual thing, but what really is important is the concept of corn. That is real." The nominalist pig says, "The word corn is just a name, and what is important is that individual ear of corn." The nominalist pig is just about ready to eat that corn! Realism affirms that there is a universal concept that could be called "cornness" somewhere. A realist could never quite decide where that concept resided, but it was somewhere. The important thing was to grasp that idea. Nominalism said that the idea of "cornness" was not really necessary. So Occam's Razor comes in here: cut off these things that you do not need. You do not need the idea of "cornness" to understand an individual ear of corn. What difference does it make which way the corn is viewed? Strangely enough, it made a huge amount of difference because the shift was from putting stress on categories and universals to specifics and individuals. The medieval world was taken up with these universals. Remember that Kenneth Clark said, "Medieval man could see things very clearly [he

could see corn and all kinds of things], but he believed that these appearances should be considered as nothing more than symbols or tokens of an ideal order [what is really real there is not the ear of corn, but the ideal order] which was the only true reality.” That is going to mean that corporate experiences are central. This includes the idea of church, state, an order, and community. Individuals are not so important. They are only part of that which is important.

The nominalist turned that completely on its head. They said to do away with the categories because they are not real. They do not make any difference, and we do not need them. Let us concentrate on individuals: this person, this ear of corn. That is going to make a difference, both in society and in science. People began empirically to study individual things rather than theorizing about what holds these things together in some sort of universal concept. Paul Tilley says, “Medieval realism maintains the powers of being which transcend the individual. Medieval nominalism preserves [emphasizes] the value of the individual.”

We have two big points. Voluntarism was a different way of thinking about God in theology. Nominalism was a different way of thinking about the world and things in it. The doctrine of salvation in both the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna* was a mixture of grace and works. We have looked at that already. Both are meritorious and semi-palagian. The old way differed from the new way significantly at this one point, though. Thomas Aquinas said of the old way that you must do something in order to be saved, but God starts the process. It is God’s grace plus your cooperation that produces more grace and consequently enables you to cooperate further with that added grace. The new way is more palagian, not less. This is because the new way says that you start the process with your own natural ability. You do what lies within you, and added to your effort, feeble as it is, is God’s mighty grace. This enables you to do something better, which produces more grace, and so on. In both systems there is a percentage theology even though the old way is preferable to the new way.

There was also, however, a modern Augustinian school that rejected both ways in terms of theology. It went back to the teachings of Augustine. We have already noted that in Thomas Bradwardine, who died in 1349, and Gregory of Rimini in Italy, who died in 1358. In the 14th century there was a renewed emphasis on the teaching of Augustine that salvation is by grace alone and not through our human effort. In the 16th century was another mighty Augustinian revival in the teaching of Luther and Calvin.

That is a description of the breakup of the medieval synthesis regarding its theology. The church was breaking up, too. We have studied this, so I will note those points in passing. There was the Babylonian Captivity of the papacy in the 14th century. There was the papal schism of the late 14th and early 15th centuries. There was failure to reform in head and members. This was an expression that was used constantly by the church. They were saying that there was need to reform the church through and through, from the pope all the way down to the least member of the church. There was much concern on the part of many, many people. The church was breaking up and collapsing under its own ineptitude and worldliness. Years of intrigue, infighting, and corruption had taken their toll on the papacy and the church. The Italian poet Boccaccio told a story about a Jew who came to Rome and embraced Christianity on the basis that any religion that could survive such iniquities of its leaders must be the true faith. If Christianity could still exist after all of this, there is something amazing about it. Reform was attempted, but it was too little and too late.

We now come to human life. As we come to the late medieval period, there are some great crises in human life. You could say that is always true in every century, and it would be a true statement. But seemingly on the eve of the Reformation, the troubles of human life were greater than before. Steven Osment says, “As never before, not even during the century of the Roman empire’s collapse, Western

people walked through the valley of the shadow of death.” You can find crises and dangers, longing and despair, illustrated in so many different ways, from the ancient *Piers Plowman*, the story of the collapse of Christian culture, to the modern book by Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror, The Calamitous 14th Century*. In her book she says, “It is reassuring to know that the human species has lived through worse before.” What she does in that big and intriguing book is write a history of the 14th century and see that as a distant mirror. In this 20th century, we can look back to the distant mirror and see that many of the same problems that our culture faces today were problems that were faced in that calamitous 14th century.

It is not a very good place to end a course, and the only thing I can say is, “To be continued...” next semester in Reformation and Modern church history. Let me end this lecture and this semester’s work this way: Barbara Tuchman said, “It is reassuring to know that the human species has lived through worse before.” I do not find that particularly reassuring as I look at the next century soon to begin. But I do find this reassuring from Isaiah 40:7-8, “The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever.”