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THE SPIRIT OF THE RENAISSANCE

THE MODERN WORLD as we know it, a world dominated by machinery and inspired by scientific achievements, came out of the period following the industrial and French revolutions of the eighteenth century. But this modern world is the heir of all the ages. It has as its heritage things which have come down from the distant past: from the ancient world, from Egypt and Babylonia, from Palestine, from Greece and Rome; from the far distant East; from the Middle Ages; from the Renaissance. Each civilization made its own contribution. In each age we find something that is akin to us today, and this is perhaps especially true of the period we know as the Renaissance, for it was this period that had in it ideas and attitudes of mind that created conditions sometimes not unlike those of today.

It is seldom possible to give definite dates for the beginning or the end of periods. In some countries the Renaissance had begun in the thirteenth century; it was at its height in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; and in northern Europe it continued through the sixteenth in the form of the great religious struggle known as the Reformation.

The medieval world, religious, political, and social, was based on the principle of unity. The individual was always a member of some social unit and it was as a corporate member of society that he gained his importance.

The medieval philosopher did not think in terms of independent states or of conflicting religious organizations. He

believed that Christendom was one great state embodying both the temporal and the spiritual sides of life. The idea of unity in government was an ancient one. Europe had inherited it first from the Roman Empire, then it had been revived by Charlemagne and finally embodied in the Holy Roman Empire. And as the Holy Roman Emperor was the temporal head of this great unity, so was the Pope, the traditional successor of St. Peter, the head of a spiritual society that bound all Christians together.

Besides the unity of the Empire, the medieval world recognized smaller units within the imperial state, and these smaller units were often more important to the daily life of medieval men than the distant governance of the Empire. A man was always part of society and important because he was a part, whether it was of the feudal system on the continent of Europe, or of the manor in England, or of the town with its highly organized merchant and craft guilds. To be outside these medieval units of society was to be an outcast indeed.

There were great scholars in the Middle Ages. There were philosophers like Abelard and Roger Bacon who were greatly daring for their time in what they believed and taught; others like St. Thomas Aquinas, whose philosophy crystallized all that was best in the medieval church into a form that was destined to live for long centuries after him. Scholars in different countries were bound together in those days by the language they used. Latin was almost universally written by all educated men; it was the language not only of the Church, but of the law and of education in general.

But at the same time that great learning existed among a few scholars, ignorance was general among the people. Literacy rates among common folk remained low throughout the Middle Ages, and the spread of learning was difficult because of its great expense. Manuscripts had to be copied, and, beautiful and artistic as they often were, the work of the copyist was a slow and laborious task, and only the rich could

afford to buy many books. The medieval scribe worked often in the scriptorium of a monastery, and the manuscripts he copied were chiefly service books or the Gospels, though in some monasteries the writings of Greek and Latin authors were also copied. The parchment used by the scribe was so costly that sometimes he took some older manuscript and erased what was on it in order to use it for his own work.

Imperial unity was the medieval ideal, but there was a great contrast between the theory and the fact, and real unity had never been achieved. The Empire was a unity only in name, and within its borders there were conflicts, jealousies, intrigues, injustice. The election itself presented too often a sordid spectacle of intrigue and bribery among the rival claimants for the imperial crown. The Emperor did not keep the peace even within his own empire and he was constantly at war without. The ideal of just and honest rule was never reached, and slowly the power of the Emperor was weakened. By the end of the Middle Ages, though the prestige of the office was still great, the Emperor had little real authority outside Germany itself and not always much within.

As a result of this weakening of imperial rule, the vision of empire was giving way to the idea of smaller nationalities, to groups of people bound together by common race and language and religion, a common history, common ambitions, common dangers, and living in a land that could be clearly defined by its natural boundaries. Of these peoples, three became great Renaissance powers: England, France, and Spain.

In England the Wars of the Roses, which ended in 1485, brought the Tudors to the throne. Under her Tudor rulers there came to England greater internal unity and security and an ever-increasing national consciousness, a feeling which was to culminate in the Renaissance England of Queen Elizabeth.

In France the final defeat of the English in the Hundred Years' War freed the land from foreign foes. As civil strife died