

Were the Middle Ages Truly a Dark Time in History?

Name

Professor

Course

Date

Within popular discourse, the historical period of the Middle Ages is synonymous with the term “Dark Ages”: how did this particular equation come about? The immediate connotations of the Dark Ages are clearly negative: they suggest oppression, ignorance and a period of motionless in human development. The reason behind this description of the Middle Ages is arguably the result of a contrast to the subsequent periods of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment: the Renaissance itself signals a “new birth”, whereas the Enlightenment clearly evokes images of a new insight and vision wielded by humanity. Accordingly, the negative values ascribed to the Middle Ages are the result of this historical period’s difference to the Renaissance. Such an account, namely, judges the Middle Ages from an entirely different world-view.

To the extent that one takes the values of Renaissance and Enlightenment as positive developments in human history, the Middle Ages will be viewed as “dark.” From another perspective, in order to dismiss the negative image of the Middle Ages, one has to deconstruct the wholly positive image of the Enlightenment, thereby questioning the presuppositions behind these descriptions. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the post-Medieval world can be considered to have “invented the Middle Ages in order to distinguish themselves from it.” (2014) The description of the Middle Ages as Dark Ages can therefore be understood according to the shift of values that occurred from the Middle Ages to the post-Medieval world.

What values and world-views characterized the Middle Ages, such that they came to be rejected and termed “dark” by the world of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment? As Julius Evola (2010) writes, “with the end of the Middle Ages, tradition...disappeared.” (p. 146) What Evola means by “tradition” in this context can be explained through the values which the subsequent historical periods developed.

The Enlightenment and Renaissance, for example, were based on the belief that in the Middle Ages something had been lost in European culture, and there was accordingly a need for a return to “classical democracy and culture, and the human perpetual search of liberty, equality, justice, reason, well-being, humane life, and happiness.” (Zafirovski, 2010, p. 87) This view of the Middle Ages accordingly views the period as one of “spiritual and political bondage due to...ignorance and pagan superstitions.” (McHugh, 2010, p. 87) What is termed by Evola as the adherence to traditional forms of life, such as traditional forms of spirituality, above all Christianity, is interpreted by the post-Middle Age era as a restriction of human creativity and potential, or in other words, a kind of slavery.

However, it is clear to see that such an account of the Middle Ages is a characterization. Simply put, the achievements of the Middle Ages embodied an entirely different value system than that of the Enlightenment. Accordingly, the accomplishments of the Middle Ages could not be understood from the cognitive horizon of the Enlightenment. The Middle Ages were dominated by a spiritual, traditional life, as Evola writes, above all influenced by Christianity; such a spiritual life can only appear as “dark” if one rejects the value of the spiritual.

At the same time, this spiritual life, which emphasized the religious values of Christendom above all, made invaluable contributions to European life. The Middle Ages produced many significant achievements not only within its own time, but also in relation to human history, such as “the classical formulations of Gothic architecture and sculpture.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014) Certainly, such achievements were closely linked to Christianity and the spiritual life. But this does not by definition disqualify their innovation and uniqueness within human history. These achievements

instead demonstrate that a particular form of creativity was also entirely consistent with the world-view of the Middle Ages, despite its overwhelming religiosity.

Yet the Middle Ages also laid the foundational stones for the subsequent historical periods that were to reject the Medieval as “dark.” For example, Grant (1996) suggests that the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment could never have happened without “the massive translations of Greco-Arabic science and natural philosophy into Latin.” (p. xiii) Accordingly, work that was also deemed important by the post-Medieval world was being conducted in the time of the Middle Ages: from such a perspective, the Middle Ages contributed invaluable sources of knowledge that cumulatively led to the scientific world-view of the post-Medieval era. Instead of a “dark age”, the image of an age that was crucial to future accomplishments emerges from this viewpoint on history.

Certainly, the Middle Ages possessed a different set of values than the post-Medieval world. The former was a world characterized by spirituality, and it is reflected in the great Christian works of art of the time period. At the same time, the Medieval world did also show an interest in the pre-Christian tradition, to the extent that they made extensive translations of previous pagan works that then helped shape the more scientific world-view of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. The decision to describe the Medieval as dark is thus the result of a different historical period applying its own internal values to the Medieval period: to the extent that the post-Medieval intelligentsia rejected the religious world-view as superstition and bondage, they advanced an account of the Medieval as dark. From another perspective, however, if one values spirituality above all else, the irony is that the post-Medieval world, with its emphasis on science and the human being at the expense of the spiritual, is the true “dark age.”

Bibliography

The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014. "The Middle Ages." *Encyclopedia*

Britannica. Retrieved at:

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/380873/Middle-Ages>

Evola, J. 2010, *The Path of Cinabar*, London, Arktos.

Grant, E. 1996, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge,

UK: Cambridge University Press.

Zafirovski, M. 2010, *The Enlightenment and its Effects on Modern Society*, New York,

Springer.