

The Carolingian Renaissance

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The period from 400 - 800 AD does not merely begin in chaos and end in a renaissance of faith in a new cultural basis. It does that. In that sense it is parallel to the other 400-year periods. However, two major events do not fit that pattern: the steady rise of Celtic Christianity even early in the period, and the antagonistic rise of Islam toward the end.

The most significant thing, in any case is the rise of the "barbarians" and their conversion by the end of the period. By "barbarians" in this context reference is made to the mainly gothic peoples. They were forced by the terror of the Huns pressing in from the East to invade and eventually conquer the city of Rome and what had been the seat of the Empire until Constantine moved it to what is present-day Istanbul.

The barbaric invasions are commonly considered the fall of Rome. They were, in fact, the fall of the *city* of Rome. They were not really the end of the Empire since the seat of Empire had long since been transferred to Constantinople and the empire continued with vigor for centuries - even if biased Western scholars have generally renamed it the *Byzantine* empire.

Furthermore, the fall of the city was not uncontested. The continuing empire sent army after army to recover it during a century-long warring seesaw that reduced the population of the Italian peninsula by 90 percent. The seriousness of that conflict can be seen if compared to the ten-year seesaw of the Vietnam war during

which the population of both the North and South did not diminish but doubled.

Also, the new owners of the city were at least partially Christianized "barbarians." They attempted to continue the functions of the western half of the empire. They soon adopted *Catholic* theology over against their previous *Arian* theology. The Benedictine movement proceeded to move north, establishing monastic centers and taking over former Celtic outposts, about 800 in total.

Meanwhile, the collapse of Roman military power in the West allowed "real" barbarians, the germanic Angles, Saxons and Frisians, to pounce into southern England as the Roman legions began to withdraw around 440 AD. Later called anglo-saxons, they, too, were eventually converted, first by the Celtic Christians they displaced and later, and gradually, to the outward formalities of the Roman version of Christianity.

Even today, the Anglican archbishop of York (in the north) wears the characteristically Eastern Orthodox vestments (Celtic Christianity came from the eastern end of the empire) while the archbishop of Canterbury (in the south) wears Roman garments. Not for another 1000 years did the Celtic Irish fully embrace Rome. When that happened it was their way of maintaining a cultural difference from the anglo-saxon cultural sphere in England which had just recently broken with Rome (under Henry VIII).

Meanwhile, during the entire 400-

800 AD period, the “mission-field Christians” of the Celtic sphere possessed the most advanced scholarship and in a significant sense “saved civilization” as Thomas Cahil’s book puts it.

But this is not the way the Roman tradition would like it to be described. We saw in the last lesson how the advanced scholarship of the Celtic movement was manifested in the person of Pelagius as early as 380 AD. As late as the very end of our period Charlemagne brought over 3,000 Celtic teachers for schools on the continent.

What has been said to be history’s most detailed artwork is to be seen in the Celtic practice of “illuminating” Biblical manuscripts out of reverence for their content. The “Book of Kells” is today perhaps the world’s most valuable piece of art.

The Celtic movement is famous for its austere penalties (remedies) for sinful conduct. These were contained in a substantial book which had a remedy, often fearsome, for everything from pride to adultery. This feature of their version of the faith impressed the Romans and became called “the Roman confessional.”

Their divergent haircut (“tonsure”) was never claimed by the Roman church, but “the Roman collar” was originally Celtic just as was the entire lower-case “Roman alphabet” which we employ to this day.

From the perspective of missions, one of the most illuminating events in the entire period was the outcome of the eagerness of the Roman tradition to move north in Britain and thus seek to “convert” the Celtic movement to Latin Christian customs and dates.

This was, in effect, the belated attempt for the Roman party to force a mission-field movement to extend the culture of the Mediterranean missionaries.

But to do this was inherently difficult. The Celtic movement was well established, as already noted. Many things were different between eastern and western mediterranean Christianities, that is, Greek and Latin. It would have been easier to forge a bond between Greek Christianity and its derivative Celtic version. The Latin vs Celtic divide ran superficially from differences of tonsure to differences of their Easter date, but much more profound were the basic differences of radically different language and culture, and even worse, differences of invaded and invaders - Celtic and Anglo-saxon.

Popular lore has it that all this was resolved by the Synod of Whitby, a forest gathering of both Roman and Celtic leaders convened by Wilfred in 666 AD. But in fact it wasn’t. Bede’s description of that meeting over a century later loyally reports the Roman customs gaining acceptance, but even more than a century later you can tell that Bede felt that the Roman emissaries were haughty while the Celtic leaders were humble.

A truly significant chain of events took place, not unlike the wisdom of the Jerusalem council in choosing the bicultural Barnabas to go to Antioch. Rome in an impressive stroke of wisdom found a new man, Theodore, to be archbishop of the Anglo-Saxon Christians, a bicultural who hailed from Tarsus in the East but who happened to be loyal to Rome. After delay-

ing three months in Rome to allow his hair to grow out in the Latin way, he was sent off to England at the age of 66 to see what he could do with the irrecconcilability of the two forms of Christianity.

Augustine of Canterbury (not to be mistaken for the North African bishop, Augustine of Hippo) apparently did not have the missiological and contextualizing insights of his superior, Pope Gregory the Great, and thus had not laid a foundation (six decades earlier) which was conducive to yielding to Celtic culture. His assumption was that since there was "one baptism" there should be oneness of customs as well.

Wilfred, who had pushed for the Synod of Whitby and its pro forma decision for the Roman way, was, by the time Theodore arrived, bishop of a huge territory. Theodore chopped it into four, incurred the wrath of the much younger Wilfred resulting in the latter's expulsion from Britain. Theodore's logic was to recognize monastic centers rather than municipal boundaries so as to harmonize both Celtic and Roman customs.

A second, Theodore-sponsored synod, convened in 668 AD, actually accomplished much of what Whitby is noted for. Theodore's influence was secured partly by the fact that, although he began his post at 66 he held it for more than twenty years. Intelligent, decisive, and insightful, his role both highlights the never-quite resolved divergence of two cultures but also the very real flexibilities of compromise. Today, well over a thousand years later, the phrase "first

among equals" may derive from the fact that of the two archbishops of the Anglican Church, York and Canterbury, the latter is said to be the first among equals.

It is interesting that while the Celtic and Roman spheres were miles apart culturally, the differences never led to the massive military collision we see a few years later as Islamic armies crossed over the Pyrenees with a view of converting all of Europe to Islam.

In this picture we see three different "earthen vessels" in which the treasure of true faith is carried, the Latin Roman, the Celtic, and the Semitic (Islam). All lean back to some extent on the Bible. Using different words, they nevertheless all recognized the same God. The Islamic movement represented a culture in which plural marriage was acceptable but not homosexuality. The Greek and Roman were the opposite. The Islamic inherited far more of the advanced civilization of Rome than remained in the western mediterranean once overrun by the Goths. The Celtic were advanced in a Christian sense but far removed from the sophistication of the mediterranean. Of the three, Islam had less contact with the Bible.

All are flawed, and their cultures are all very different from one another. What we see is clearly a recipe for misunderstanding and mutual opposition, but at the same time the very possibility of our faith being carried in quite different "earthen vessels" gives it today a unique advantage over all other major religions.

By contrast, when people propose one earthen vessel over all others to

command the stage, then, that very advantage is lost.

Thus, when people speak of the extinction of the Christian church in North Africa that way of saying it does not make clear that for most of the constituents it was simply a case of exchanging an ill-fitting (and dangerous) Roman garment for a safer and more readily fitting Semitic garment. The New Testament presents the lateral shifting of the faith from one culture to another. There was nothing inherently contrary to that NT process in the fact that Mohammed founded a culturally Semitic tradition. There was nothing wrong in the use of Arabic or praying to Allah, or praying five times a day or belief in the virgin birth of Jesus. Actually all those things Mohammed borrowed from the Christians. Arabic Christians were praying to Allah for 500 years before Mohammed was born. Today around the world there are 30 million Christians who still pray to Allah and see the same word in their printed Bibles.

What was profoundly unfortunate in the case of Islam is that the Christians with whom Mohammed was in contact possessed only parts of the Bible, and, in fact, had a faulty view of the Trinity (which he rightly rejected).

The Qur'an is at least as deficient as the Book of Mormon, even though many have been led to Christ by reading the Qur'an. Worse still are the additional and later writings and traditions. Much of the things that are objectionable in Islam developed either later than Mohammed or are merely features of Arabic culture, just as much of Christianity cannot be blamed on the

Bible and developed later, or is merely Mediterranean culture (such as celibacy and homosexuality).

It would be alarming if the Faith was watered down going into Greek culture, further diluted going on into Latin culture, further still when it was passed on to German culture, and so on. However, the consistent remedy for that kind of watering down is that eventually each new cultural group replaces the missionary message with knowledge gained directly from the Bible itself. All church movements thus must have direct access to the Bible.

For example, in the 400 to 800 AD period the Celtic movement did have direct, serious contact with the Bible. The Muslims did not. Today, Muslims still primarily need contact with the Bible. Urging them to "accept Christ" and call themselves "Christians" is not good enough. The name change is not even necessary.

In the first volume of Winston Churchill's four-volume *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, he makes the comment that in the eighth century settled Europe was subjected to "two blasting, external assaults." He referred to the huge army of the Saracen Muslims which crossed the Pyrenees from Spain into today's France, and was barely defeated in 732 at the Battle of Tours in south France. He also referred to a far worse onslaught from the north - the "Norsemen" - the Vikings - pouring into middle Europe from today's Scandinavia for 250 years. But that second assault falls into the 800 to 1200 AD period.

The most permanent "assault" upon

the Gothic sphere was the quiet, non-military infiltration of first Celtic and then Benedictine centers - the 800-some centers mentioned earlier. These centers were the result of a peculiar phenomenon called *monasticism* in which unmarried men, forsaking marriage (yielding to the mediterranean respect for celibacy) banded together for various reasons: devotion to Christ, safety and security, evangelism, and in a turbulent age, the desire to preserve Roman literature and technology.

Perhaps their most significant characteristic was their high respect for the Bible. They copied it painstakingly, sang their way through the Psalms each week, and made it the focus of their existence. Were it not for these consecrated centers we would know next to nothing today about either the Roman empire or the Bible.

Other than those documents copied and handed down in these monastic centers only four manuscripts survive from Roman times. Today, virtually all of the major cities of Europe were once tiny points of light - just as cities in this country like Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, were once Moravian mission-established towns planted in the forests of North America.

You may hear these days what a mistake it was to plant "mission stations" and expect the people in surrounding areas to adapt to the implanted culture from afar. But that is what happened in many places. It did work. That is why the Latin language was the uniting language of Europe and America for so many centuries continuing even after the emergence of printing and the literary use of the ver-

naculars. Latin continued to be taught widely in American schools as late as the 1940s. It continues to be the uniting language of the Roman Catholic church.

Once the threat of the Roman legions was no longer the case, it is not surprising that the Roman language and culture of the Benedictine movement became the preferred pattern over the much more austere Celtic tradition, due to the long remembered prestige of the Roman empire. Rome had to fall for its religion to spread. However, the extensive influence of Celtic Biblical sophistication cannot be overestimated.

It was the grandfather of Charlemagne that stopped the Muslim invasion of France. Charlemagne, himself, according to some scholars was the most influential ruler on earth for 1,000 years before and after his life. But, remember, he is the one who needed to bring 3,000 Celtic teachers into his realm to establish schools for common people. He is the one who adopted their orthography - called the "Celtic minuscule," which today forms our lower case alphabet (even though it's called *Roman*).

The final century of the 400 to 800 AD period well deserves the label scholars have given it: the Carolingian Renaissance. This is one of the chief reasons to abandon the later snobbery of the label "Dark Ages" after the fall of the western Roman sphere. The Carolingian Renaissance was the pinnacle of light and lift to the tribal, "barbarian" region of Europe. Too bad that much of it was to be destroyed by the Vikings. But that is the story of the