How Christianity Civilized Barbarian Europe in Just One Hundred Years

by Emmet Scott (January 2014)

At the dawn of the tenth century most of Europe was a rural backwater. All of the lands east of the Elbe (and almost all east of the Rhine) were barbarian-infested wastelands without a trace of literate civilization. Those to the west, in Gaul and Britain, and even in Italy, were not much better. In this region there prevailed an almost universal illiteracy and a subsistence barter economy of the most primitive kind. There existed only a handful of towns with more than 30,000 people, and even these were nothing like the towns of the Roman period. England had none, with the possible exception of London. Even Rome had little more than the same figure. Yet by 1492, when Columbus set out on his great voyage of discovery, Europe stood on the verge of world domination. The continent, from the Atlantic almost to the Urals, was full of towns and cities built partly of stone and brick, with dozens of universities and a thriving economy. The whole of Europe was crisscrossed with roads which conveyed an astonishing array of wealth and produce from one region to another. Printed books were everywhere, and literacy was extremely common, even among the relatively poor.

What had happened in the intervening years? The answer is no secret, and until fairly recent times was widely accepted and celebrated: Christianity, and with it a rejuvenated form of Latin civilization, commenced, from around 950, to spread east of the Rhine and north of Germany. By 1050 this Christianized Latin civilization had advanced almost as far east as the Ural Mountains, raising towns, cathedrals, universities, schools and hospitals in every land it entered. Indeed, the continent of Europe was civilized and transformed in this one century even more quickly than the continent of North America was transformed in the years after 1700. It took two centuries for literate and urban civilization to spread in America from the Atlantic to the Pacific: the vast space between Rhine and Urals was civilized in little more than one.

The conversion of northern and eastern Europe to Christianity, when it began, proceeded at breakneck speed. Harald Bluetooth the King of Denmark was baptized, along with his court and many of his subjects, in 965, whilst King Mieszeko of Poland was baptized a Christian in 966. The Kingdom of Rus, under its ruler Vladimir I of Kiev, adopted the Orthodox version of

Christianity in 988, and on Christmas Day 1000 (or New Year's Day 1001), King Stephen of Hungary brought his nation into the Christian fold.

All very well, it might be said, but how was Christianity able so easily to civilize Europe's barbarians? After all, the mighty and cultured Roman Empire had been known to the barbarian peoples centuries earlier, yet this contact had failed to elicit any meaningful progress. The tribal peoples might enjoy Roman artifacts, and *objets d'art*, but these things had effected very little change in their outlook or lifestyles. What was different about Christianity?

The answer to this must surely lie in the knowledge, the goodwill, and the humane culture which the Christian monks and missionaries carried into the barbarian regions. In an age in which historians have been spellbound by a crude economic determinism (surely the most influential of all Karl Marx's ideas), they have forgotten the sheer economic value of knowledge, humane values, and faith. In 1997 sociologist Rodney Stark examined the earlier triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire (*The Rise of Christianity* (Harper San Francisco, 1997)) and concluded that in the fourth and fifth centuries the new faith had a revitalizing effect on the Roman world – a world which had been mired in stagnation and decay since the middle of the second century. Above all, Stark concluded, the advent of Christianity meant an increase in the population – a population which had been shrinking since 150 AD. The care which Christian communities provided for the sick, of both their own and pagan communities, was one reason for this. Another was the rejection by the Christians of abortion and infanticide, both of which were utterly commonplace amongst the pagans. Repeated attempts, Stark notes, by various emperors to discourage infanticide and improve the birth rate were always met with failure. The Christians were the only group in the empire (apart from the Jews) who were increasing by normal demographic process.

The eastern parts of the Roman world, being closest to the Christian heartland, were converted first, and they were first to enjoy the fruits of Christian civilization: By the fifth century historians speak of a massive increase in the population and prosperity of the Eastern Empire and are happy to describe the fifth and sixth centuries in the area as a "golden age." (See *e.g*. Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome; and the End of Civilization,* Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 124.)

The pagan peoples east of the Rhine and north of the Danube, like the pagan Romans, practiced infanticide and abortion. They also waged more or less perpetual war against their neighbors, and had technically stagnant economies. Their populations were small and remained small. Such agriculture they practiced was of the most primitive kind – normally cattle herding, combined with small scale horticulture. Some tribes had not progressed much above the hunter/gatherer

phase.

The acceptance in the second half of the tenth century of Christianity by the kings of the tribal regions opened those territories, for the first time, to the profoundly humane and progressive influence of the new faith and effected an immediate and dramatic change. The most revolutionary of these were the work of monks, who acted like the front line troops of Christendom. Only in the last hundred years have scholars come to realize the true and immense impact of the monastic orders, particularly the Benedictines, upon the development of European civilization. It has been noted by more than one writer that one can scarcely find a single endeavor in the advancement of civilization during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in which the monks did not play a central role. It is well-known, of course, that they preserved the literary inheritance of the ancient world (much more completely, in fact, than was previously realized), yet they did much more. According to one scholar, they gave "the whole of Europe … a network of model factories, centers for breeding livestock, centers of scholarship, spiritual fervor, the art of living … readiness for social action – in a word … advanced civilization that emerged from the chaotic waves of surrounding barbarity. Without any doubt, Saint Benedict was the Father of Europe. The Benedictines, his children, were the Fathers of European civilization."(Reginald Gregoire, Leo Moulin, and Raymond Oursel, *The Monastic Realm,* Rizzoli, New York, 1985, p. 277.)

We could fill volumes enumerating the achievements of the Benedictines. That they single handedly preserved much of ancient literature is well-known. Not so widely known is the enormous quantity of that literature that they saved. We are accustomed to think that, following the collapse of the Western Empire, most of the literary heritage of Greece and Rome was lost in the west and was only recovered after contact with the Arabs in Spain and Italy during the eleventh century and after the fall of Constantinople during the fifteenth. Yet this notion is quite simply untrue. The great majority of the literature of Greece and Rome that has survived into modern times was preserved by the monks of the sixth and seventh centuries and was never in fact forgotten. Thus for example Alcuin, the polyglot theologian of Charlemagne's court, mentioned that his library in York contained works by Aristotle, Cicero, Lucan, Pliny, Statius, Trogus Pompeius, and Virgil. In his correspondences he quotes still other classical authors, including Ovid, Horace, and Terence. Abbo of Fleury (latter tenth century), who served as abbot of the monastery of Fleury, demonstrates familiarity with Horace, Sallust, Terence, and Virgil. Desiderius, described as the greatest of the abbots of Monte Cassino after Benedict himself, and who became Pope Victor III in 1086, oversaw the transcription of Horace and Seneca, as well as Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* and Ovid's *Fasti*. (Cited from Charles Montalembert, *The Monks of the West: From St. Benedict to St. Bernard*.

Vol. 5, London, 1896, p. 146.) His friend Archbishop Alfano, who had also been a monk of Monte Cassino, possessed a deep knowledge of the ancient writers, frequently quoting from Apuleius, Aristotle, Cicero, Plato, Varro, and Virgil, and imitating Ovid and Horace in his verse.

By the end of the tenth century we find that monasteries all over Europe were in possession of enormous libraries stacked with the works of the classical authors, and that knowledge of Greek and even Hebrew was widespread. This is important, because it illustrates the continuity between this period and the world of Late Antiquity, and calls into serious question the entire concept of the Dark Age. It shows too that Christian Europe did not need to depend upon other societies and cultures (such as the Islamic) to reacquaint it with letters. Thus we find for example that Gerbert of Aurillac, later Pope Sylvester II, taught Aristotle and logic, and brought to his students an appreciation of Horace, Juvenal, Lucan, Persius, Terence, Statius, and Virgil. We hear of lectures delivered on the classical authors in places like Saint Alban's and Paderborn. A school exercise composed by Saint Hildebert survives in which he had pieced together excerpts from Cicero, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Seneca, Terence, and others. It has been suggested that Hildebert knew Horace almost by heart. (John Henry Newman, in Charles Frederick Harrold, ed., *Essays and Sketches,* Vol. 3, New York, 1948, pp. 316-7.)

If the monks were classical scholars, they were equally natural philosophers, engineers and agriculturalists. Certain monasteries might be known for their skill in particular branches of knowledge. Thus, for example, lectures in medicine were delivered by the monks of Saint Benignus at Dijon, whilst the monastery of Saint Gall had a school of painting and engraving, and lectures in Greek and Hebrew could be heard at certain German monasteries. (*Ibid*., p. 319.) Monks often supplemented their education by attending one or more of the monastic schools established throughout Europe. Abbo of Fleury, having mastered the disciplines taught in his own house, went to study philosophy and astronomy at Paris and Rheims. We hear similar stories about Archbishop Raban of Mainz, Saint Wolfgang, and Gerbert of Aurillac. (*Ibid*., pp. 317-9.)

The monks, from the time of Benedict onwards, established schools all over Europe. Indeed, our word "school" is related to the word "Scholastic," a term used to broadly define the system of thought and philosophy developed by the monks of this period. Scholastic thinking was based largely on Aristotle, and represented real continuity with the classical traditions of philosophy and rationality.

As well as teachers and educators, the monks established the first hospitals. These were the first institutions ever to exist providing free medical care to all, irrespective of financial circumstances. In the words of one writer: "Following the fall of the [Western] Roman Empire,

monasteries gradually became the providers of organized medical care not available elsewhere in Europe for several centuries. Given their organization and location, these institutions were virtual oases of order, piety, and stability in which healing could flourish. To provide these caregiving practices, monasteries also became sites of medical learning between the fifth and tenth centuries, the classic period of so-called monastic medicine. During the Carolingian revival of the 800s, monasteries also emerged as the principal centers for the study and transmission of ancient medical texts."(Günter B. Risse, *Mending Bodies, Saving Souls: A History of Hospitals,* Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 95)

As noted by the above writer, their interest in healing led the monks naturally into medical research, and in course of time they accumulated a vast knowledge of physiology, pathology, and medication. Their studies of herbs and natural remedies led them into the investigation of plants, and they laid the foundations of the sciences of botany and biology.

As part of the Rule of Benedict, the monks were committed to a life of work, study and prayer, and the work part often involved manual labor in the fields. This led to a renewed respect for this type of activity amongst the aristocracy who, by the late Roman period, had come to regard manual work with contempt. Their labors in the fields produced a deep interest in agriculture and agricultural techniques. New technologies were developed by the monks, including, almost certainly, the windmill. Everywhere, they introduced new crops, industries, or production methods. Here they would introduce the rearing of cattle and horses, there the brewing of beer or the raising of bees or fruit. In Sweden, the corn trade owed its existence to the monks.

When Benedict established his Rule, much of Europe was still an uncultivated wilderness. This was true primarily of those areas which had never been part of the Roman Empire, such as Germany, but even of parts of Gaul and Spain, as well as Britain and Ireland remained in this condition into the sixth and seventh centuries. These areas the monks brought under cultivation, often deliberately choosing the wildest and most inhospitable tracts of country to set up their houses. Many of the virgin forests and marshes of Germany and Poland were brought into cultivation for the first time by the monks. "We owe," says one writer, "the agricultural restoration of a great part of Europe to the monks." According to another, "Wherever they came, they converted the wilderness into a cultivated country; they pursued the breeding of cattle and agriculture, labored with their own hands, drained morasses, and cleared away forests. By them Germany was rendered a fruitful country." Another historian records that "every Benedictine monastery was an agricultural college for the whole region in which it was located."(Alexander Clarence Flick, *The Rise of the Medieval Church,* New York, 1909, p. 223.) Even nineteenth century French historian Francois Guizot, a man not especially

sympathetic to Catholicism, observed: “The Benedictine monks were the agriculturalists of Europe; they cleared it on a large scale, associating agriculture with preaching.”(See John Henry Cardinal Newman, *loc cit*. pp. 264-5.)

It would be possible to fill many volumes outlining the contribution made by the monks, particularly those of the Early Middle Ages, to the civilization and prosperity of Europe. Their role cannot be emphasized strongly enough; yet it is one that has been curiously overlooked by many historians. In the 1860s and 1870s, when Comte de Montalembert wrote a six-volume history of the monks of the West, he complained at times of his inability to provide anything more than a cursory overview of great figures and deeds, so enormous was the topic at hand. He was compelled, he said, to refer his readers to the references in his footnotes, in order that they might follow them up for themselves.

The evidence then, taken together, would seem to show that Christianity had an enormous transformative and revitalizing power. As explain in my new book, Mohammed and Charlemagne Revisited: The History of a Controversy and