

GOD AND REASON
IN THE MIDDLE AGES

EDWARD GRANT

Indiana University



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INTRODUCTION

MOST WHO STUDY THE POLITICAL, SOCIAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND intellectual developments in Western Europe during the Middle Ages find it easy to believe that “Western civilization was created in medieval Europe.” George Holmes, the author of that sweeping statement, argues further that

[t]he forms of thought and action which we take for granted in modern Europe and America, which we have exported to other substantial portions of the globe, and from which indeed, we cannot escape, were implanted in the mentalities of our ancestors in the struggles of the medieval centuries.¹

Just what was implanted in the peoples of the Middle Ages between approximately 1050 to 1500? Nothing less than a capacity for establishing the foundations of the nation state, parliaments, democracy, commerce, banking, higher education, and various literary forms, such as novels and history.² By the late Middle Ages, Europe had also produced numerous laborsaving technological innovations. The profound problems involved in reconciling church and state, and natural philosophy and Scripture were first seriously encountered in this same period. Indeed, it was during the Middle Ages that canon and civil law were reorganized and revitalized. Not only did these newly fashioned disciplines lay the foundations of Western legal systems, but from the canon law also came the concept of a corporation, which enabled various institutions in the West – commercial, educational, and religious – to organize and govern themselves in a manner that had never been done before.

1. George Holmes, ed., *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), v. These are the opening words of the book in the “Editor’s Foreword.”

2. See *ibid.*, v–vi.

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Why did Western Europe emerge in the tenth and eleventh centuries to begin the development of all these institutions and activities? We may never really know, but one factor that undoubtedly played a significant role was a new self-conscious emphasis on reason that is already apparent in the educational activities of the eleventh century and in the emerging theology that began at approximately the same time. The new emphasis on reason affected all the subject areas that formed the curriculum of the universities that came into being around 1200.

Concurrent with these developments was the application of reason to societal activities. In his splendid book, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, Alexander Murray takes a very broad approach to reason and shows it operating in various aspects of society. In the first part, he treats of reason in economics, devoting separate chapters to money, avarice, and ambition, following with a significant chapter titled "Reason and Power." In this chapter, Murray seeks to show that from the late eleventh century onward, there developed "the concept that the mind, quite apart from any pleasure or edification its exercise may afford, is an efficacious weapon in man's battle with his environment."³ Technology, magic, and astrology were all used to do battle with the natural environment. By using one or more of these three tools, one could exercise power over nature. Murray also regards the study of history as an illustration of the use of reason because "history helped you avoid mistakes."⁴ The study and use of arithmetic in commerce and government was another powerful illustration of the application of reason.⁵ In all this, and in subsequent treatment of the intellectual elite, the universities, and the nobility, Murray emphasizes that the use of reason was viewed as a means to power and upward mobility. He explicitly avoids academic discussions about faith and reason, explaining that "academic disputes were relatively esoteric; and our business is with reason on the broadest-possible social stage."⁶

The broad manner in which Murray uses the term *reason* does not distinguish the ways in which the West used reason differently than it had ever been used before. After all, mathematics, especially arithmetic and algebra, was used extensively by the ancient Mesopotamians. The peoples of ancient Mesopotamia also kept extensive economic records on clay tablets, thus

3. Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), III.

4. *Ibid.*, 131.

5. See *ibid.*, Part II, Chapters 6–8.

6. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

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recording commercial dealings. And yet there is no evidence that the Mesopotamian peoples self-consciously emphasized reason, although they were clearly using it. In late antiquity and in Islam, magic and astrology played significant roles. If these activities constitute an exercise of reason, then we might well conclude that these other societies also emphasized reason, perhaps as much as did the West. Murray has interpreted the use of reason so broadly that we find little to distinguish the medieval Latin West from Islam, the Byzantine Empire, and any other society in which magic, astrology, and mathematics were practiced and used, and where upward mobility may have been a factor. There is nothing distinctive about the use of reason in the societal activities that Murray distinguishes.

In this volume, I shall largely confine my study of reason to medieval intellectual life as it developed within the universities. In emphasizing the curriculum of the medieval universities, I shall focus on the disciplines of natural philosophy, logic, and theology and their interrelations, which inevitably involved faith and reason. Murray omitted discussions of these subjects because they were too esoteric and would draw attention away from the use of reason on “the broadest-possible social stage.” And yet, I shall attempt to show that it was in the esoteric domain of university scholasticism that reason was most highly developed and perhaps ultimately most influential. Indeed, it was permanently institutionalized in the universities of Europe. Reason was interwoven with the very fabric of a European-wide medieval curriculum and thus played its most significant role in preparing the way for the establishment of a deep-rooted scientific temperament⁷ that was an indispensable prerequisite for the emergence of early modern science. Reason in the university context was not intended for the acquisition of power over others, or to improve the material well-being of the general populace. Its primary purpose was to elucidate the natural and supernatural worlds. In all the history of human civilization, reason had never been accorded such a central role, one that involved so many people over such a wide area for such an extended period. To explicate how reason functioned in the university environment and how it was related to revelation and faith, and, to a much lesser extent, how it was related to observation and sense perception, is the major objective of my study.

PERCEPTIONS OF HISTORICAL EPOCHS

The urge to cut history into tidy, manageable segments and to characterize each segment by a memorable catch-phrase has been with us for some time,

7. Because I find the phrase “scientific temperament” descriptive of an important aspect of the medieval approach to the world, I shall use it a number of times in this study.

and will probably remain with us into the foreseeable future. Two widely used phrases that purport to capture the essence of two historical epochs are “The Age of Faith” for the Middle Ages and “The Age of Reason” for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. If these are apt descriptive phrases, we may properly infer that in moving from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we have shifted from faith to reason, that we have somehow emerged from an age of uncritical belief, and even ignorance, to one of knowledge based on the use of reason.

There is an element of truth in these pithy descriptive phrases. The Middle Ages did stress faith, and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did lay emphasis on reason and reasoned discourse. But a single feature, however prominent, cannot characterize an historical epoch. In every period of history, many things develop and evolve concurrently. Although faith was a powerful force in the Middle Ages, so was reason. In this study, my aim is to describe and interpret the role that reason played in the medieval effort to understand the physical and spiritual worlds.

We are many things simultaneously. Indeed, the dominance of science and technology in our own age might tempt one to infer that ours is a pre-eminently rational age. Closer inspection reveals how rash such an inference would be. Think of all the irrationalities that pervade our society, many of them masquerading under the very science that epitomizes rationality. New Age religions abound and alternative medical treatments promise to accomplish what traditional medicine fails to achieve and cannot promise. Indeed, the ultimate health claim is immortality, a state of existence that is promised to all who join People Forever (headquartered in Scottsdale, Arizona). The claim of this aptly named organization is to have discovered the secret of immortality. According to one of its spokespersons, the human species “has the ability to perpetually renew itself” by “tapping into the intelligence of the cells themselves.” People Forever claims that it has members in 16 countries with a mailing list of 10,000 and a monthly magazine. Although three of its members had died when a reporter wrote about the group, and one of the group confessed that they could not guarantee immortality, another member insisted that “the minute you decide you want to live forever, everything else falls into place.”⁸ Indeed, in this year of 2000, six years after the article about the group appeared in 1994, the group is still around. From their website, where the last dated entry I found is 1998, we can see that their leader, or one of their leaders, Mr.

8. From an Associated Press article in the *Herald-Times* of Bloomington, Indiana, on July 24, 1994.

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Charles Paul Brown, published a book titled *Together Forever: An Invitation to Physical Immortality*.⁹ Moreover, “every Wednesday night, Charles and a growing body of cellularly-connected individuals gather in Scottsdale, Arizona to share the adventure of infinite immortal life.”¹⁰ Apparently, audiotapes of “Charles’ expressions at the weekly gatherings are available for \$10 per set.”

Whatever else they may be, we can safely assume that the organizers of this movement are not irrational – the dream of immortality has perhaps made them comfortable, if not downright rich. But what about the deluded individuals who join People Forever hoping, and expecting, to achieve physical immortality? Do they mark an advance over medieval gullibility and superstition? It does not appear so. In behalf of the denizens of the Middle Ages, we might mention that they too were seized with a great desire for immortality. But they achieved it the old-fashioned way: by first dying, a method not susceptible to counterinstances.

Also noteworthy are past efforts by the now-defunct Soviet Union and the United States to use psychic power to achieve state and military objectives. Indeed, such powers are not reserved for governments alone. For a few dollars, you can dial your favorite psychic and learn all about your future, or, if you prefer, read your horoscope in a daily newspaper. The indubitable fact that what we know today about the world and its operations dwarfs what was known about it during the Middle Ages, might lead us to believe that this enormous disparity in knowledge would also produce an analogous disparity in the use of, and reliance on, reason. If we confine our comparison to the literate in both periods, we moderns of the twenty-first century ought to be eminently more rational than our counterparts in the Middle Ages. But this is hardly obvious, and is very likely untrue. Sheer magnitude or quantity of information cannot in itself guarantee a more rational society. The Age of Information that has engulfed us is, alas, not synonymous with knowledge and wisdom. While science itself requires a rational methodology, the success of science is no guarantee that those who live in a society in which science is dominant and pervasive will usually act rationally. Untold mischief has been done, and will continue to be done, under the good name of *science*.

9. The URL address in which excerpts from Mr. Brown’s book appear is: <http://www3.pair.com/genesis/charlespaulbrown/excerpts/index.html>. A check of library catalogs shows that the book does exist under this title. It was published in Scottsdale, Arizona, in 1990 by the Eternal Flame Foundation. On the Web site, the title of the book is erroneously given as *Together Forever: An Invitation to Be Physically Immortal*.

10. Cited from a different, though no longer existing, hyperlink that ended with [/gatherings/index.html](#).

THE DARK SIDE OF REASON

Many aspects of human behavior carried out in the name of reason and science are irrational, although not devastating. Nevertheless, we must recognize that reason has an ominous, dark side. During the Middle Ages, much else went on that was less lofty and noble than reason, sometimes even masquerading as reason. Superstition, religious persecution, brutality, and ignorance were reason's constant companions. Many, if not most, of the medieval authors who will be cited here for their emphasis on reason in one context or another may have been far from rationalistic in many other aspects of their lives. It is rare that one attribute – reason, or superstition, or brutality, or whatever – dominates our behavior to the exclusion of all others.

If nothing else persuades us that those who lived in the Middle Ages were no less rational than we moderns, and were perhaps even more rational, we should recall the grotesque atrocities carried out in the twentieth century by the likes of Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Pol Pot, and a host of lesser murderers. During the Middle Ages, heretics were considered dangerous to the faith and, therefore, in the absence of a tradition of tolerance, often persecuted. Few in the Middle Ages would have judged the torture and execution of heretics and witches as unreasonable. The twentieth century was no stranger to such behavior. All too often, it witnessed the coexistence of reason and irrational persecution. Even as they tortured and murdered millions and millions, Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin ruled over governments that relied heavily on science, and, therefore, on the reason that made it all possible. The dark side of reason will, unfortunately, always be with us. The misapplication of reason to gain knowledge, to resolve problems, or to control our lives better seems an unavoidable aspect of human society. We cannot forget the perverse medical experiments that were performed on innocent victims by Nazi and Japanese doctors during World War II, nor indeed the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiments in the United States carried out on African Americans from 1932 to 1972.

The dark side of reason, which often draws upon ignorance, fear, prejudice, and hatred, is an all-too-common feature of the human condition. Because of this perennial dark side, there is no effective means of measuring and comparing the rationality of one age against the rationality of another. But it is worth mentioning that witchcraft persecutions intensified in the seventeenth century and magic played a greater role in the sixteenth century than it ever did in the late Middle Ages, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Middle Ages had its brutal atrocities and egregious stupidities. It also had the Inquisition. By comparison to their mod-

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ern counterparts, however, the murderous irrationalities of the Middle Ages seem less flagrant. Those who lived during the Middle Ages simply lacked the capacity to kill and destroy on the scale of modern societies.

If this were a study of human society as a whole, the dark side of reason would have to play a significant role. But this is a book about the positive side of reason, rather than its ominous aspects, and I shall, therefore, say no more about the societal impact of the darker recesses of the human intellect.

THE APPROACH TO REASON IN THIS STUDY

Without the rigorous use of reason to interpret the natural phenomena of our physical world, Western society could not have developed science to its present level. Indeed, our society cannot survive without science and the reasoning that makes it possible. Even the problems science causes can only be remedied by science itself. But *when*, *how*, and *why* did Western civilization place reason at the center of intellectual life and thereby make possible the development of modern science? The answer to the “when” part of this query is straightforward: the late Middle Ages, from around 1100 to 1500.

In a book that is well known to scholars of eighteenth-century intellectual history, Carl Becker showed rare insight into the nature of medieval thought when he characterized it as highly rationalistic. “I know,” he explained, “it is the custom to call the thirteenth century an age of faith, and to contrast it with the eighteenth century, which is thought to be pre-eminently the age of reason.”¹¹ Becker explains that “since eighteenth-century writers employed reason to discredit Christian dogma, a ‘rationalist’ in common parlance came to mean an ‘unbeliever,’ one who denied the truth of Christianity. In this sense Voltaire was a rationalist, St. Thomas a man of faith.” But Becker explains that Voltaire and Thomas did share something rather important, namely, “the profound conviction that their beliefs could be reasonably demonstrated.” Because of this shared conviction, “in a very real sense, it may be said of the eighteenth century that it was an age of faith as well as of reason, and of the thirteenth century that it was an age of reason as well as of faith.”¹² Much of this study is an effort to provide evidential support for Becker’s perceptive insights by demonstrating that medieval university scholars and teachers, spread over four centuries or

11. Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 8.

12. *Ibid.*

more, placed a heavy reliance on reason. Moreover, in the history of civilization, they were the first to do so self-consciously on a grand scale.

In the modern incarnation of Western civilization, a new attitude emerged toward reason and rationality. By the “modern incarnation of Western civilization” I mean the new society that emerged from the transformation of the Roman Empire in Western Europe during the turbulent centuries of the barbarian invasions – from approximately the sixth to tenth centuries.¹³ By the late eleventh century an energetic new society and civilization had come into existence and the momentous events that will be mentioned and discussed in this study were under way. A major feature of the new European society was an extraordinary emphasis on the use of reason to understand the world and to solve problems, both practical and theoretical. Although the scope of reason would be greater in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the period traditionally described as the Age of Reason, I shall argue that that age began in the late Middle Ages, which deserves to be regarded as the unqualified starting point for what would become a growing and evolving emphasis on reason as the arbiter of disputes and disagreements. The differences that seem to distinguish the use of reason in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from its use in the late Middle Ages derive largely from major changes in European history – the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution,¹⁴ to name two of the most significant. The range of uses to which reason could be applied undoubtedly expanded in the later period, but it could do so only because the ground had been solidly prepared in the preceding centuries. Reason was not a newly emphasized activity that burst forth in the so-called Age of Reason in contrast to its relative absence in the late Middle Ages. I shall argue that the Age of Reason is hardly imaginable without the central role that reason played in the late Middle Ages. If revolutionary rational

13. Historians of the Roman Empire no longer speak of a “decline and fall” of that empire in the West, to allude to Edward Gibbon’s famous title, but about a transformation into something else. The Roman Empire in the East, the Byzantine Empire, was remarkably strong and resilient, continuing on until 1453, when it was captured by the Turks and became part of the Ottoman Empire. See Glen W. Bowersock, “The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome,” in *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49 (May 1996), 29–43.

14. In recent years, the concept of a Scientific Revolution in the seventeenth century has been challenged. But whatever term, or terms, we may use to embrace the dramatic changes that occurred in science in that century, there could be no doubt that something significant occurred. For lack of a better term to describe those changes, I have retained the expression Scientific Revolution.

thoughts were expressed in the Age of Reason, they were made possible only because of the long medieval tradition that established the use of reason as one of the most important of human activities.

Reason, however, is not a medieval invention. Indeed, it is an activity that is manifested in every civilization and in every culture. Humans could not survive without it. What differentiates Western civilization from other societies and cultures that used reason is the self-consciousness with which it was used, and the scope, intensity, and duration of its application.

The achievements of Western society were made possible because of the intellectual gifts it received from the pagan Greeks, the Byzantine Christian Greeks, and the civilization of Islam. Although reason was valued in these civilizations, it was consciously esteemed by a relatively small number of scholars who were never sufficiently influential to give reason the intellectual standing that it would receive in the medieval West. The West did what no other society had previously done: It institutionalized reason in its universities, which were themselves an invention of the West.

But what is reason? How should it be understood for the purpose of this inquiry? One cannot approach the use of reason in the Middle Ages without simultaneously thinking of its opposite activity, revelation. Strictly speaking, revelation, that is, the articles of faith, is not subject to reason. Revelation is true because it embraces truths that are believed to come directly from God, or from His revealed word in Holy Scripture. Such truths – the Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption, and Eucharist – are beyond the comprehension of human reason. Where reason applies logical analysis to problems about the physical world and to aspects of the spiritual world, the same kinds of analyses are of no avail when applied to articles of faith. Reason, Christians argued, could neither prove nor disprove such revealed truths. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Christian scholars, usually theologians or theologian-natural philosophers, often tried to present reasoned analyses of revealed truths. They did so ostensibly better to understand, or to demonstrate, what they already believed on faith. We shall see that the use of reason in medieval theology and natural philosophy was pervasive and wide-ranging. Indeed, medieval scholars often seem besotted with reason. But there was one boundary line that reason could not cross. Medieval intellectuals, whether logicians, theologians, or natural philosophers, could not arrive at conclusions that were contrary to revealed truth – that was heresy. Not until the seventeenth century, and then far more pervasively in the eighteenth century, was reason applied to revelation without restriction or qualification.

So far as my study is concerned, that is the major difference in the way scholars used reason in the Middle Ages as compared to the way they used it

in the Age of Reason. While it is a significant difference, it should not obscure the more fundamental truth that reason, and reasoned argumentation, lay at the heart of medieval intellectual life. Reason was the weapon of choice at medieval universities. Its systematic application to all the disciplines taught at the university gives us a sound basis for claiming that the academic use of reason on a broad, even vast, scale was a medieval invention.

With the exception of revealed truth, reason in the Middle Ages could be used to analyze virtually anything without fear of repression. By relating reason to revelation, however, we only learn about the bounds within which reason had to operate. From that, unfortunately, we do not learn what reason is. Since my objective is to describe how reason was viewed by medieval scholars, the role they assigned to it, and how they actually used it, it will be useful to characterize briefly the medieval attitude toward reason. During the late Middle Ages, reason in its traditional sense was regarded as "a faculty or capacity whose province is theoretical knowledge or inquiry; more broadly, the faculty concerned with ascertaining truth of any kind."¹⁵ The medieval understanding of theoretical knowledge was derived from Aristotle, and it embraced metaphysics, or theology as it was also called, natural philosophy, or physics, and mathematics. Overarching all these disciplines was logic, which was regarded by Aristotle and his medieval followers as the indispensable instrument for demonstrating theoretical knowledge.¹⁶ During the Middle Ages, reason was "contrasted sometimes with experience, sometimes with emotion and desire, sometimes with faith."¹⁷ In this study, I shall contrast reason with experience and faith, but ignore emotion and desire.

Although logic, reason's most precise expression, was the supreme tool for the application of reason to theoretical knowledge, reason was regarded as much broader than formal logic. Reason in the Middle Ages was not tied to any particular theory of knowledge. Nominalists, realists, empiricists, and partisans of other theories of knowledge in the history of philosophy have regarded themselves as consciously applying reason to the resolution of philosophical problems. A modern philosopher has presented a good sense of what the broader aspects of reason and rationality imply for all philosophers, including those of the Middle Ages. "Rational inquiry," he has declared,

15. From A. R. M. (Alfred R. Mele), "theoretical reason," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 796.

16. In the course of this study, I shall deal with all of these except mathematics.

17. A. R. M., "theoretical reason," 796. Although A. R. M. does not mention the Middle Ages, what he says serves to illuminate the role of reason in that period.

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is to be viewed as an impersonal search for truth. It is impersonal in a number of respects. First, there is some method of inquiry that can be used by anyone. Second, the method yields evidence that would convince any rational person of the truth or falsity of a particular theory. Finally, the product of applying this method is a true theory that describes things adequately for any rational being and that, by virtue of discounting the influence of any particular being's contingent perspective, furnishes a picture of the universe from a cosmic or "God's eye" point of view.¹⁸

The importance of rationality in Western thought cannot be overestimated. For philosophers, it has been a "special tool for discovering truth,"¹⁹ and for modern scientists, it has been the key to the transformation of society. Modern science is the outcome of a rigorous and successful application of reason to myriad problems that have confronted the human race over the centuries.

REASON FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

The self-conscious, explicit use of reason and the emphasis on rationality go back to the ancient Greeks.²⁰ But the path of reason was never smooth and incremental. Already in antiquity, Sophists and Sceptics were critical of rationality and the claims that had been made for it by Platonists and Aristotelians.²¹ Nor did the ship of reason sail on smooth seas during the late Middle Ages. But it did sail and survive the storms that battered it from time to time.

With perhaps a few exceptions, philosophers, scientists, and natural philosophers in the ancient and medieval periods believed unequivocally in the existence of a unique, objective world that, with the exception of miracles, was regarded as intelligible, lawful, and essentially knowable. Thus, the powers of reason could be applied to a real, external world that had changeable and unchangeable characteristics. The parts of that world were not regarded as of equal value and virtue. To the contrary, almost all medieval scholars, following Aristotle, believed in a hierarchical universe where, at the very least, the celestial region was regarded as incomparably superior to the terrestrial region – the

18. From Stephen Nathanson, *The Ideal of Rationality* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1985), 10.

19. Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), xii.

20. If earlier peoples had similar attitudes toward reason, they have not been preserved in any literary traditions of which I am aware.

21. See Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 1.

part of the world that lies below the moon, or between the moon and the center of the earth.²² While reason was not considered the only means of understanding this hierarchical cosmos, it was viewed favorably because it seemed the most powerful tool available for attaining knowledge about the regular day-to-day workings of the real, natural world.

The instruments that reason used for understanding the hierarchical, external world of the Middle Ages were logic, natural philosophy, metaphysics, and the exact sciences. At first, the ecclesiastical authorities in Paris, the most important intellectual center of medieval Europe by virtue of being the location of the University of Paris, viewed with alarm the secular learning that had begun entering the West in the latter half of the twelfth century. As evidence of this, Aristotle's natural philosophy was banned at the University of Paris during most of the first half of the thirteenth century. By 1245, however, natural philosophy and the sciences were fully embraced, and they became the pillars on which the university arts curriculum was built. But theology and natural philosophy, or theologians and natural philosophers, found themselves in conflict again in the 1270s. Conservative theologians were alarmed at the tone and content of discussions in natural philosophy. They were concerned that Aristotle's natural philosophy was circumscribing God's absolute power to do anything He pleased, short of a logical contradiction. They feared that natural philosophers in the faculty of arts at the University of Paris were too captivated by Aristotle's opinions and would adopt his ideas at the expense of Church tenets and revealed truth. There was also an ongoing interdisciplinary struggle at the University of Paris between the two faculties of arts and theology. The arts masters regarded themselves as the guardians of reason as embodied in the natural philosophy of Aristotle. They were professional natural philosophers, some of whom devoted their lives to that discipline. The theologians in the faculty of theology, most of whom had also studied natural philosophy, were responsible for interpreting revelation as embodied in the Bible and Church doctrine and law. In the 1260s, conservative theologians became alarmed at some interpretations of Aristotle that were either written or transmitted orally.

In 1270, acting on the appeals of some of his theologians, the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, condemned 13 articles that had been drawn from the writings of Aristotle and his Islamic commentator, Averroës. In 1272, the faculty of arts, trying to circumvent more drastic action, instituted an

22. On the celestial and terrestrial regions and their relations, see Edward Grant, *Planets, Stars, & Orbs: The Medieval Cosmos, 1200–1687* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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oath that required all masters of arts to avoid theological questions in their teachings and writings. If perchance theological ideas and concepts were unavoidable, it was made incumbent on the oath taker to resolve the dispute in favor of the faith.²³ The tensions were apparently unresolved during the next few years, because in March, 1277, the bishop of Paris condemned 219 propositions drawn largely from the works of Aristotle, as well as from current ideas and distortions of those ideas, that were circulating in Paris. The Condemnation of 1277 not only set theologians against arts masters but also exacerbated rivalries among the theologians themselves, pitting neoconservative Augustinian theologians, perhaps influenced by St. Bonaventure, who had died in 1274, against the Dominican followers of St. Thomas Aquinas, who also died in 1274. So bitter was the controversy that some of St. Thomas's opinions were among those condemned in 1277.

Despite these difficulties, natural philosophy was welcomed within Western Christendom and became a powerful tool for both natural philosophers and theologians. It was valued precisely because it represented a rational approach to the world and was, therefore, viewed as supplementing revelation, and occasionally even explaining it. No better tribute was paid to the utility and importance of natural philosophy than its adoption as the basic subject of study in the curriculum of all arts faculties of medieval universities.

REASON AND REVELATION

Although, as we have seen, Carl Becker believed that in the Middle Ages reason played a significant role in addition to faith, he explained how that reason was employed. "Intelligence," by which Becker means reason,

was essential, since God had endowed men with it. But the function of intelligence was strictly limited. Useless to inquire curiously into the origin or final state of existence, since both had been divinely determined and sufficiently revealed. Useless, even impious, to inquire into its ultimate meaning, since God alone could fully understand it. The function of intelligence was therefore to demonstrate the truth of revealed knowledge, to reconcile diverse and pragmatic experience with the rational pattern of the world as given in faith.²⁴

23. The statute was translated by Lynn Thorndike, *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 85–86. Thorndike's translation is reprinted in Edward Grant, *A Source Book in Medieval Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 44–45.

24. Becker, *The Heavenly City*, 7.

Becker's insistence that "intelligence," or reason, was solely confined to "demonstrate the truth of revealed knowledge" is untenable. The entire span between the "origin" and "final state" of existence is equivalent to the period that the created cosmos had endured. It was not theology's role to investigate the workings of that cosmos. That task fell to natural philosophy and science, which relied most heavily on reason, and to a lesser extent on experience and observation (see Chapter 5), to carry out their mission. Indeed, it was natural philosophy (and logic) that provided the theologians with the reasoned arguments they needed – or thought they needed – to investigate revealed knowledge. Why natural philosophy was so vital to the dissemination of reason will be made apparent later (see Chapter 3).

Much of what can be construed as reason, or reasonable, in the late Middle Ages is similar to our own ideas about reason and rationality. Nevertheless, there are significant differences that derive from radically different views about the relationship between reason and revelation and reason and experience. As we shall see in the following chapters, the earliest emphasis on reason in the intellectual life of the Middle Ages was a by-product of the turmoil that afflicted Europe from the sixth to tenth centuries. The problems that eventually served to project reason into the forefront were associated with the disarray and disorganization of knowledge in crucial areas of human activity, most notably in theology and law. Even more important was the age-old Christian problem between faith and reason. That relationship is of momentous significance in understanding how reason was used and the scope it had. But reason fared as well as it did because the same Christian society that had to cope with the relationship between reason and revelation eagerly, though often with some trepidation and anxiety, embraced the most monumental collection of rationalistic works assembled anywhere in the world prior to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, namely, the works of Aristotle, the greatest of Greek philosophers. Aristotle's ideas and attitudes transformed the way the West thought about the world and its operations.

During the late Middle Ages, those who applied reason to the solution of problems in theology knew that, in the final analysis, reason was subordinate to faith, the Christian faith based on the revelation of fundamental truths that were assumed to be beyond the ken of reason. Not until the eighteenth century could one suggest with impunity, though not without some hostile reaction, that unhindered reason was the only appropriate means of investigating all phenomena, including revealed religion.

Reason was important in the Middle Ages because the domain of thought was divided between truths presented by revelation and truths

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made available by reason. But if revelation was truth beyond compare, the rock on which Christian society was built, reason became the means to understand that revelation and its associated spiritual matters. In explicating the mysteries of revelation, reason was clearly subordinate, although its role would be significant and it often took on a life of its own. But reason was much more than a mere handmaiden for the explication of revelation. It was the essential tool for explaining the operation of the entire physical cosmos. Indeed, that was its primary role, a role that was given to it by Aristotle in his natural books. Because Christians wisely avoided Christianizing, or theologizing, natural philosophy, natural philosophers pursued knowledge about the universe in a remarkably secular and rationalistic manner with little interference from the Church and its theologians, who were themselves often engaged in the same activity: trying to understand the workings of the physical world. Much of this study will be devoted to explaining and illustrating these activities.

Does reason's subordination to religion during the Middle Ages signify that the Age of Reason could not have occurred in that period? It does, if by the Age of Reason we mean that everything, including revelation, is subject to analysis by reason. "In the field of religion," during the Age of Reason, "reason was considered capable of finding in itself and by itself the essential truths touching the nature of God and the duties of man; as a guiding principle it was sufficient in itself."²⁵ This book, however, is not about the Age of Reason, but about its beginnings. Without the momentous events that unfolded in the Middle Ages, during the period from approximately 1100 to 1500, the seventeenth-century version of the Age of Reason could not have occurred. In this study, I shall attempt to demonstrate this profound truth, and also to show how the Middle Ages came to be seen through a distorted historical lens. Rather than the proper perception of the late Middle Ages as one in which reason was regarded as the most powerful investigative resource available to the human intellect, the Middle Ages came to be viewed as an age in which reason was largely absent, an age in which superstition, ignorance, and empty rhetoric flourished in place of reason.

This study will be divided into seven chapters and a conclusion. The first describes the low point of European civilization in the early Middle Ages and the vibrant, new society that emerged in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the second chapter, I shall describe the emergence of reason as a

25. Ernest Campbell Mossner, *Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason: A Study in the History of Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), 14.

potent factor in the early Middle Ages to the end of the twelfth century; and in the third chapter, I shall briefly describe the new elements – the translations, especially the works of Aristotle; Aristotle himself and why he was so important; and the universities – that allowed European society to institutionalize reason and to perpetuate its impact and influence. In the following three chapters, I describe the way medieval scholars used logic (Ch. 4), natural philosophy (Ch. 5), and theology (Ch. 6), indicating the manner in which these disciplines employed reason and the extent to which these three disciplines relied on, or used, each other.²⁶

Despite the great emphasis on reason that was characteristic of medieval thought, and that will be described in this study, the Middle Ages is hardly known as an age of reason. Indeed, it is more often thought of as an age of unreason. One need only mention the word “Inquisition” to arouse in a modern audience ideas of ignorance, superstition, cruelty, and fear. Indeed, one need only utter the word “medieval” to cause the same feelings. How did the Middle Ages come to be viewed as a period that was antithetical to reason? How did such a patently false idea about the Middle Ages take root? Answers to these questions will be attempted in the seventh, and concluding, chapter.

I have reserved the Conclusion for examining perhaps the most important consequence of a widespread and intensive use of reason: the culture and spirit of “poking around.”

In these chapters, my aim is to focus on the positive use of reason as it shaped the intellectual life of medieval Europe. I shall emphasize those aspects of reason that exhibit the “scientific temperament,” and pay little attention to the manner in which reason was used to organize and disseminate the knowledge that reason itself had produced. When all is done, I hope that I shall have successfully balanced accounts by showing that just as the Middle Ages laid the foundation for the irrational witchcraft persecutions of the seventeenth century, so also did it lay the foundations for the Age of Reason, which, in its most positive and laudable aspects, was associated with the new science of the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

26. For the two other disciplines, law and medicine, see Chapters 2 and 3.