

From Synthesis to Analysis A Journey of the Western Mind

Charles F. Herberger

ANYONE WHO MAKES a serious attempt to understand the culture of the European middle ages is sooner or later struck by the genius for synthesis which that period displayed in almost every department of human activity. The period, or rather the latter centuries of it, appears to have been dominated by a rage for order, inclusiveness, and wholeness or in other words by a drive toward synthesis. We have only to think of the inclusiveness and internal relatedness of the moral and physical cosmos of Dante's *Comedia*, of the intellectual comprehensiveness of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, of the typical medieval "histories of the world" or *cursor mundi*, or the intricate variety within unity of a cathedral like Chartres to perceive that the medieval way of thinking and feeling was not ours but a synthetic way.

I take our present exciting but chaotic civilization to be essentially the by-product of some four to five hundred years of a quite different way of thinking and behaving, an analytic way. During the Renaissance, the Reformation and the seventeenth century scientific revolution, the medieval synthesis began to dissolve. It dissolved in the crucible of abstraction, and the dissolving agent was the acid of analysis. This is more than a metaphor. The great analytic movement that began at that time has continued to make itself felt ever since, and it has produced our modern world. In religion it meant the division and splitting up of the universal church—both as an institution and as a means of rationally dealing with the mysteries and dilemmas of human existence. In politics it meant the dissolving of feudalism

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and the beginning of that process of abstraction and isolation from the universal family of man which we have come to call "nationalism." In the economic area, another process of abstraction took place. In the form of fluid money (capital), economic value was extractable from the total context of other human values that pertained in the middle ages—nobility, family, land, tradition, etc. A Florin (abstract economic value) was just as negotiable in the hands of an upstart tailor setting up as banker as it was in the hands of a Holy Roman Emperor. In the various arts, it meant the end of craftsman anonymity in the service of an aesthetic vision from God's point of view, as it were, to an abstracting of individual vision. Murals, for instance, give way to the individual window on reality, the easel painting—carefully signed either literally or through an unmistakably unique style. In historiography it meant the abstraction of a limited historical vision, national history or even

"Romanticism's emphasis upon individual self-expression in the arts led away from centrality of vision and toward ever more isolated personal idiosyncrasy. It also led to l'art pour l'art and consequently to the abstraction of art from the context of other human values."

biography, from the total vision of Western Man's story, the medieval *cursor mundi*.

Finally, it meant the separation of philosophy from theology, rapidly followed by the separation of science from philosophy. In turn, science itself split up into sciences, dependent upon how much each discipline abstracted from the total context of reality as its basic postulates or assumptions. Hence, today we have no science in Aristotle's sense—no inclusive rationale of the structure of reality—but instead astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology, etc. And even