

BIGOTRY AND THE BAD OLD TIMES

(By G. K. CHESTERTON in the *New Witness*.)

How long will educated people go on using the name of one highly civilised European period as a phrase for every sort of savagery? There are a million examples of it in a month's reading; here is one on which my eye has just fallen. A writer in the *Nation* is dealing, in the somewhat depressed manner common in that able publication, with the different parties in Germany; and what chance there is of Catholic or Socialist sections really resisting Potsdam and Pan-Germanism. He substantially admits that what wins every time is not only Prussia but Prussianism. But the way he expresses it is this: "The modern men opposed it; but the men of the Middle Ages won." This is a description of the success of Prussia, which did not exist in the Middle Ages, acting through a system of military organisation that was not yet invented in the Middle Ages, in appealing to a racial theory of Teutonism that nobody had ever heard of in the Middle Ages, and supported in it by a sixteenth-century religion and a number of nineteenth-century philosophies, all of which the Middle Ages would probably have persecuted as particularly insane heresies. But the joke is really even better than that. I have never based much hope upon Bavarian dislike of Prussia; still there is a Bavarian dislike of Prussia, and the political school of the *Nation* does base a great deal of hope on it. I myself fear it is not much use to appeal to the Centrum as an Opposition; still, it is a sort of Opposition, and the *Nation* is always appealing to it. Indeed the Catholic party probably has done something, though it has never done enough, to criticise the heathen cruelty of the Prussian theory; and Mr. Massingham would probably trust such internal intervention more and not less than I should. But surely if any men in modern Germany might reasonably be called "the men of the Middle Ages" it is the men who still happen to retain the religion of the Middle Ages. The fact that they are, by common admission, *less* Prussianist than the Prussians, disposes at a blow of the suggestion that Prussianism is medievalism. What prevails in practice however is, at the very earliest, the eighteenth-century spirit of Frederick the Great and the nineteenth-century spirit of Bismarck. The men of the Middle Ages opposed it; but the modern men won.

It would be easy to prove, point by point, that this is quite the contrary of a mere coincidence of party labels: that it is an essential fact of fundamental ethics. Not only the saints or knight-errants, but the tyrants or traitors of the Middle Ages, would have been unable to make head or tail of Teutonism in philosophy or Prussianism in politics. If the Kaiser were a king in the twelfth century, for instance, he might have claimed Alsace, and claimed it quite unjustly. But he would have claimed it ostensibly on some heraldic tangle of hereditary right, based on its feudal relations with princes of the Holy Roman Empire. But to have claimed another king's territory on the ground that the men living on it had yellow hair, or some sort of skulls that a professor had measured and called Teutonic, would have been totally unmeaning to him. A fierce and fantastic Troubadour, of the type of Bertrand de Born, might have been merciless in the madness of his pride in his descent from a mythical hero. He could not possibly have been merciless, as Nietzsche advised, on the mere ground that it had been the method of his ascent from a monkey. But it is needless to note all the detailed examples when the thing is obvious in the bulk; in the broad fact that Prussia is in a peculiar sense the modern State that arose only after the end of medievalism; and that its chief mark has been the demand of the central idea of medievalism; the idea of a common interest of Christendom. In reality, of course, the case is too subtle to be dealt with by anything so clumsy as chronology. Prussia stood for a new spirit which ap-

peared when the sense of Christendom declined; but even then it did not decline elsewhere as it did in Germany; and it certainly did not decline so much as its critics think it did. Those who suppose, as the editor of the *Nation* once suggested to me in a very sympathetic remonstrance, that medievalism is really dead, can certainly point to Prussia in support of their supposition. Prussia is almost the only support of their supposition. Prussia certainly could not have appeared save where the Middle Ages had largely disappeared. And doubtless she does stand for that disappearance in many departments for a definite period. But he who supposes that the spirit of the Middle Ages has finally disappeared may reasonably be asked to face some of the most solid and vivid facts of the modern world. And the truth is that the modern world has been a chaos which, whenever it has tried to be a cosmos, has tried to be a medieval cosmos. Indeed, the recent decades, apart from the Middle Ages, might be called the Middle Ages.

Superficially it might seem that the nineteenth century was the nadir of all medieval influences. It would certainly seem that England was the country in which they had been most carefully extirpated. Yet consider even the case of England in the nineteenth century; and it might be easy to represent the Victorian Age as a medieval revival. It is not necessary to speak of the Oxford Movement, or of the spires from which some have heard whispered "the last secrets of the Middle Ages"; for the case of Oxford understates and weakens the case of England. There was a medieval element in the movement that put life into the Church of England, merely because there was a medieval element in all the movements that put life into anything. Even in the externals of religion the movement has been universal rather than sectional. Medieval symbolism has returned not only to all "high churches," but to all churches; not only to all churches, but to all chapels. It is a commonplace that the Non-conformist is now a Ritualist; and the very strongholds of No-Popery are what would once have been called Popish. Ritualism may be only a fashion, but it is the fashion. That is all I am concerned to point out in this particular question of superficial or practical success. But it is only by a sort of chronological accident that we need to speak first of ecclesiastical changes. Medievalism was not merely potent among the religious; it was perhaps even more potent among the irreligious. The church-defyers only differed from the church-decorators in extending the same decoration from one church to a hundred houses. The aesthetes only used the medieval symbol, without meaning, on a wallpaper instead of using it, with meaning, on a rood-screen. It may not be entirely natural to imagine Swinburne in a surplice, or Pusey æsthetically crested with a peacock's feather. But it is none the less certain that in both their imaginations the tide turned and set towards the same imaginative centuries. A poem like "Dolores" is none the less adorned and colored like a medieval missal, because it gilds the name of Satan and not that of God. No one will say it was without significance that Rossetti was called Dante, or even that he was called Gabriel. Even the pagans did not really attempt to return to paganism. In the poems of William Morris, in the pictures of Burne-Jones, they perpetually tried to see even the white marbles of the Greek through the colored windows of the Gothic. But William Morris's revolution was not a piece of antiquarian clericalism in a corner. It was a revolution in whole streets of common cockney houses; a revolt of chairs and tables; a dance of pots and pans. Even in Victorian England, therefore, it is admitted by now that two blasts of renovation blew for beauty and humanity; one in every parish church and the other in every parish. And both came across the centuries from "the men of the Middle Ages."

And now we see before our eyes the same thing happening again. It is happening yet a third time; in yet a third department of human life. The master word of really modern industrial politics is the word "guild." The new sociologists find it as vital as New-

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