**The Transformation of the Medieval Era**  
Selections from *Passions of the Western Mind* by Richard Tarnus

For many early medieval theologians, direct study of the natural world and the development of an autonomous human reason were seen as pernicious threats to the integrity of religious faith.  It is true that according to official Christian doctrine the goodness of God’s material creation was not ultimately denied, but in itself the world was not considered a worthy focus of human endeavor.  If it was not altogether evil, it was, in spiritual terms, largely irrelevant. (p. 166)

Yet the Cristian world view, even in its medieval form, was not as simple or one-sided as these distinctions might suggest.  Both impulses—optimistic and pessimistic, dualistic and unitive—constantly intermingled in inextricable synthesis….In the eyes of many conscientious Christians, the fact that the continuity of sacred revelation and ritual had been successfully maintained century after century far outweighed the passing evils of contemporary Church politics or the temporary distortions of popular belief and theological doctrine.  From such a perspective, the Church’s saving grace lay finally in the cosmic significance of its earthly mission. (p. 167)

And in contrast to the previous centuries of often distressing philosophical uncertainty and religious alienation, the Christian world view offered a stable, unchanging womb of spiritual and emotional nourishment in which every human soul was significant in the greater scheme of things.  An unquestioned sense of cosmic order prevailed, and it would be difficult to overestimate the tremendous charismatic potency contained in the supreme figure of Jesus Christ, binding together the entire Christian universe.  Whatever limitations medieval Christians may have felt would seem to have been compensated by the intense consciousness of their sacred status and potential for spiritual redemption. (p. 168-169)

But perhaps above all, we must be wary of projecting modern secular standards of judgment back onto the world view of an earlier era.  The historical record suggests that for medieval Christians, the basic tenents of their faith were not abstract beliefs compelled by ecclesiastical authority but rather the very substance of their experience….We must assume that the medieval experience of a specifically Christian reality was as tangible and self-evident as say, the archaic Greek experience of a mythological reality with its gods and goddesses, or the modern experience of an impersonal and material objective reality fully distinct form private subjective psyche. (p. 179).

[T]he complex evolution of the Western mind from the medieval Christian world view to the modern secular world view, [was] a long and dramatic transformation in which classical thought would play a pivotal role….Despite an awareness of their specially graced spiritual status, intellectually conscious Christians of the early Middle Ages knew themselves to be living in the dim aftermath of a golden age of culture and learning.  But in the Church’s monasteries, a few kept alive the classical spark.  In that politically and socially unsettle era, it was the Christian cloister that provided a protected enclosure within which higher pursuits could be safely sustained and developed. (p. 171)

The demands of the next world occupied the attention of devout Christians, and so deterred any compelling interest in nature, science, history, literature, or philosophy for their own sake….the development of human reason was sanctioned and encouraged solely for the purpose of better understanding the mysteries and tenets of Christian doctrine. But at the midpoint of the medieval period, around the year 1000, with Europe finally attaining a measure of political security after centuries of invasion and disorganization, cultural activity in the West began to quicken on many fronts:

population increased, agriculture improved, trade within and beyond the continent grew, contact with the neighboring Islamic and Byzantine cultures became more frequent, cities and towns emerged along with a literate upper class, guilds or workmen formed, and a general rise in the desire for learning led to the founding of universities. The fixed world of the old feudal order was giving way to something new. (p. 172-173)

Technical advances highlighted the value of human intelligence for mastering the forces of nature and acquiring useful knowledge….The young and barbarian [invaders had become part of the population] Christian West was emerging, through its own enterprise, as a vigorous center of civilization. (p. 173-174)

As Western culture as a whole transformed itself, the Catholic Church’s attitude toward secular learning and pagan wisdom also underwent a fundamental change….Under these new circumstances, the Church began to sponsor a tradition of scholarship and education of extraordinary breadth, rigor, and profundity….The Greek [culture] was again springing forth in a new incarnation. The West’s increasing interest in the natural world and in the human mind’s capacity to understand that world thus found congenial institutional and cultural support for its new enterprise. (p. 175-176)

Within the womb of the medieval Church, the world denying Christian philosophy forged by Augustine and based on Plato began giving way to a fundamentally different approach to existence, as the scholastics in effect recapitulated the movement from Plato to Aristotle in their own intellectual evolution. (p. 176)

That shift was sparked in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the West’s rediscovery of a large corpus of Aristotle’s writings, preserved by the Moslems and Byzantines and now translated into Latin. Medieval Europe’s sudden encounter with a sophisticated scientific cosmology, encyclopedic in breadth and intricately coherent, was dazzling to a culture that had been largely ignorant of these writing and ideas for centuries. (p. 176)

But with the introduction of Aristotle and the new focus on the visible world, the early Scholastics’ understanding of “reason” as formally correct logical thinking began to take on a new meaning: Reason now signified not only logic but also empirical observation and experiment—i.e., cognition of the natural world. With the increasingly extended scope of the philosopher’s intellectual territory, the tension between reason and faith was now radically heightened. A constantly growing multiplicity of facts about the concrete things had to be integrated with the demands of Christian doctrine. (p. 177-178)

These scholars of Scholasticism’s golden age could not have known the ultimate consequences of their intellectual quest to comprehend all that exists. For by confronting so directly this tension between divergent tendencies—Greek and Christian, reason and faith, nature and spirit—the Scholastics prepared the way in the late medieval universities for the massive convulsion in the Western worldview caused by the Scientific Revolution. (p.178)

In Aquinas, the forces at work in the immediately previous centuries came to full articulation. In his relatively brief life he would forge a world view that dramatically epitomized the high Middle Ages’ turning of Western thought on its axis, to a new direction of which the modern mind would be the heir and trustee. (p. 178)