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Western Society And The Church In The Middle Ages (The Penguin History Of The Church) (v. 2)



Synopsis

The concept of an ordered human society, both religious and secular, as an expression of a divinely ordered universe was central to medieval thought. In the West the political and religious community were inextricably bound together, and because the Church was so intimately involved with the world, any history of it must take into account the development of medieval society. Professor Southern's book covers the period from the eighth to the sixteenth century. After sketching the main features of each medieval age, he deals in greater detail with the Papacy, the relations between Rome and her rival Constantinople, the bishops and archbishops, and the various religious orders, providing in all a superb history of the period.

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Customer Reviews

As readers of my reviews may notice, I am fairly sparing in awarding "5s". These are usually reserved for books which have an unusual impact on me. "Western Society and the Church in The Middle Ages" has earned its "5". This book does an excellent job of explaining Western Society of the Middle Ages and the Church's role in it. It starts by explaining Western Society at the start of the Middle Ages and how that era developed out of the ruins of the Roman Empire. The Middle Ages is defined as the middle era between the fall of the Roman Empire in the West and the coming of the Modern Age. It describes a society in which everything is viewed as part of a divinely ordered plan, perhaps the only era in history to hold that view. It goes on to weave the story of the Church into the society of its era. On these pages, the reader comes to understand how the Ecclesiastical structures took on many of the duties of the state, either in the absence of, or with the

encouragement of, the secular authority. The role of the Church in creating and administering wealth present a society much different from our own. I was surprised to read that, at the start of the Middle Ages, the Eastern Empire was a more prosperous and cultured realm than the, then barbaric, West. The explanation of the gradual drifting apart of the Eastern and Western Church, leading to the schism of 1054, is brought into much clearer focus than I had ever before experienced. The alien pressure brought upon the Eastern Church by rising Islam created one last surge for unity, but it was too little, too late. The Middle Ages, running from about 700-1300, are depicted as an era of evolving political and religious structures, each of which fulfilled a need of its time.

R.W. Southern's book titled *WESTERN SOCIETY AND THE CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE AGES* is a readable account of the Medieval Catholic Church from c 750 to c. 1450. Southern concisely explained the achievements, successes, and failures. According to Southern, the achievements and successes far outweighed the failures and wrong doing. Southern's book began with the special relationship between the new "barbarian" secular rulers and the Catholic clergy especially the monks and bishops. The fact that most secular rulers were not literate especially in the use of Latin, they relied on learned Catholic clergy. The Catholic clergy became crucial and both they and the secular rulers relied on each other. While Charlemagne (768-814) had a revered status as the defender of the Latin West, Southern mentioned his reliance on Catholic clergy. Charlemagne could read, but he never learned to write. He was aware of his own deficiencies and started the Palace School at Aachen where, among others, Alcuin (735-804) and other learned men expanded learning at a time called the Carolingian Renaissance. What readers should appreciate is that without Catholic clergy and monks, learning would have disappeared in Western Europe. Southern was very clear about this. The Medieval Catholic authorities faced other challenges. Long simmering feuds existed between the Byzantine Greek Orthodox Church authorities and the Latin Roman Catholic authorities. During the eighth century and again in 1054, the official reasons for tensions were the use of icons (The Iconoclastic Controversy) and the status of the Pope. As Southern wrote, these tensions were a cover for the disputes between the Italians and Byzantine Greeks over Byzantine control of parts of Italy.

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