

*Hilaire Belloc's
View Of History*

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Note from Jake

Hilaire Belloc wrote *The Great Heresies* in 1938.

Europe And The Faith

In a time like our own, when previously separated cultures and civilizations have been brought together, one of the subjects of greatest interest is the meaning of world history and the significance of the present within it. This question has been answered by a number of different philosophies of history, which have sought in some secular goal the meaning of mankind's destiny. Starting at least with the 18th-century Enlightenment, the purpose has been to replace the Christian conception of history with one or another secular ideology, presented in strongly messianic terms. Their hope has been to create a new heavenly city on earth, and to see the Christian hope for eternal happiness as merely "pie in the sky," as Marxists like to call it. Thus we have the progress theory of the Enlightenment, the idea of Hegel that the Prussian state was the culmination of history, the Marxist claim that the classless society was the destined end of history, the Nietzschean belief that the coming of the Superman was the goal towards which history is moving, and various nationalist interpretations which saw this or that individual nation as being the means by which mankind's salvation was to be achieved. Possibly the most influential of these latter was the ideology which gave birth to National Socialism and to its New Order based on blood and soil, which Hitler strove to make a reality.

Now, against all these secular ideologies, which adhere in one form or another to Nietzsche's doctrinaire statement — "I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes" — there still remain advocates of a Christian and Catholic conception of history. Among these we may include John Henry Newman from the 19th century, G.K. Chesterton, Christopher Dawson, Etienne Gilson, Stanley L. Jaki, R.C. Zaehner, and Hilaire Belloc, with whose view of the overall development of history this essay is concerned. Each of these Catholic thinkers has a somewhat different angle of approach in applying the Christian view of history to specific events and movements. Thus Gilson's approach is based on the development of philosophy from

the time of the Greeks down to the 20th century, Zaehner's has as its field the comparison of Christianity with other world religions, while Jaki's is concerned with the way in which, compared with other world civilizations, Western Christian culture has been responsible for a unique development of science, unmatched anywhere else in world history.

Hilaire Belloc's view of world history is probably best found in his book entitled *Europe and the Faith*, published in 1920. Later, in 1925, he defended this view in a series of sharp criticisms of *The Outline of History* by H.G. Wells.

Here are some of the characteristics of Belloc's view of history. Its central theme is the linking of European development with the Catholic Faith, so that he goes so far as to say on the very first page of this book, "Europe is the Church, and the Church is Europe." And the last two lines of his book read: "Europe will return to the Faith, or she will perish. The Faith is Europe. And Europe is the Faith."

Now we should note that in these last three sentences, however much we may agree with the first one, there is a striking contradiction. If indeed the Faith and Europe are identified with each other, how can we possibly speak of Europe returning to the faith? It is only if Europe is not the Faith that she can depart from it and have the option of a return to it. However intimate may have been the link between Europe and the Catholic Church in the past — and this is subject to some qualification — that is not the same thing as saying that Europe and the Faith are one.

Probably these few sentences of Belloc have done more to disqualify him as an interpreter of world history than anything else which he has written. For the Catholic Church has been engaged for several centuries in trying to extend the Catholic Faith to non-Western peoples, not by a process of cultural imperialism, such as would be required if "the Faith is Europe," but by trying to add certain elements from native cultures in order to give better expression to the truths of the Faith and their universality.

This work of incorporation would have to be cast aside as having followed a wrong path, if Belloc's dictum were true. The fact that he makes his statement so dogmatically has a certain appeal for people who feel themselves beleaguered by

the advance of Oriental cults and the New Age movement; but essentially it is a counsel of defeat and a retreat into some supposed inner citadel.

Moreover, when we examine what Belloc means by “Europe,” we find that it has a very limited content and excludes a good part of what Europe actually consists. This results from Belloc’s viewing the history of Europe from the standpoint of France and his consequent tendency to depreciate persons or movements which are not linked to France. He is especially hostile to Germany and the northern peoples of Europe. Here, for example, is what he has to say about Luther and the Protestant Reformation:

Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, German by birth and speech, [was] one of those exuberant, sensual, rather inconsequential characters which can never pretend to organization or command, though certainly to creative power... He was out for ‘protest,’ and he floated on the crest of the general wave of change...

Luther (a voice, no leader) was but one of many: had he never lived, the great bursting wave would have crashed onward much the same.

A more complete distortion of the significance of history could scarcely be imagined. But then Luther was German, not French. For Belloc, therefore, it is John Calvin, who was French, who is the real centerpiece of the Reformation. What Belloc does not seem to understand is that the power of Luther’s eloquence in speech and in writing gave an impetus to the forces of rebellion against the Catholic Church which they would otherwise not have had. Creative power, which Belloc does grant to Luther, makes a strong impact on the affairs of men; and certainly those who possess it and exercise it, as Luther did, cannot be called “inconsequential,” which is how Belloc seeks to dispose of Luther. The work of Calvin, for example, would not have been possible if Luther had not first led the way.

What is most striking in all of this is that Belloc here contradicts one of his most cherished principles: that it is the individual and his decisions which play a most crucial role in history. Thus the individual is not simply swept along by the

power of impersonal forces and movement. Yet, when it comes to Luther, who certainly played a key role in the origins of the Protestant Reformation, Belloc tells us that “he floated on the crest of the general wave of change” and that “had he never lived the great bursting wave would have crashed onward much the same.”

This is a good example of how a basic prejudice often interferes with Belloc’s interpretation of history. In this instance he tosses his own principle into the discard in order to satisfy his deeply felt prejudice against the Germans.

In contrast to Belloc’s minimizing the significance of Luther, we have this estimate of Luther by G. K. Chesterton, who says that Luther was one of the major forces for the making of the modern mind. In the last chapter of his book on St. Thomas Aquinas and Luther, Chesterton gives us this picture of the man who launched the Protestant Reformation on its course:

We must be just to those huge human figures, who are in fact the hinges of history. However strong, and rightly strong, be our own controversial conviction, it must never mislead us into thinking that something trivial has transformed the world. So it is with that great Augustinian monk, who avenged all the ascetic Augustinians of the Middle Ages; and whose broad and burly figure has been big enough to block out for four centuries the distant human mountain of Aquinas.

He was one of those great elemental barbarians, to whom it is indeed given to change the world. To compare those two figures bulking so big in history, in any philosophical sense, would of course be futile and even unfair. On a great map like the mind of Aquinas, the mind of Luther should be almost invisible. But it is not altogether untrue to say, as so many journalists have said, without caring whether it was true or untrue, that Luther opened an epoch and began the modern world.

Belloc’s Francocentric view of European history is based on the belief that Europe has received the inheritance of the civilization of Rome, and that it was through Gaul or France that this was passed on to the other European nations.

Thus the conquest of Gaul by Julius Caesar in the first century before the Christian era is seen as the key to all later developments, for it made Gaul part of the Roman Empire and led to its thorough Romanization. Later, the conversion of Gaul to Christianity toward the end of the fifth century A.D., when Clovis, the Frankish king, accepted the Christian Faith, was decisive for all later developments. In this conception of European history, Belloc places as much emphasis on the civilization of Rome as he does on the Catholic Church, perhaps even more so, since he writes, in giving the contributions of Rome to Europe:

This state [i.e. the Roman Empire] was to be the soil on which the seed of the Church was to be sown. As the religion of this state the Catholic Church was to develop. This state is still present underlying our apparently complex political arrangements... Its institutions... are still the stuff of Europe. The religion which it made as universal as itself is still, and apparently more notably than ever, apparent to all.

— (Last paragraph of chapter I of *Europe and the Faith*.)

This, it seems to me is a fine instance of a partial truth being made to serve as the whole truth. Certainly Rome was important as the transmitter of the Mediterranean cultural heritage to the peoples of northern Europe. But it was not the source of many of the elements which it transmitted, but only some of them. It was the Greeks who created Hellenism with its manifold achievements in the realms of rhetoric, literature and poetry, art and architecture, philosophy and the science of politics. After their conquest of Greece, the Romans willingly became the pupils of the Greeks, and while adding their own distinctive achievements, including the Latin language, the Romans became the carriers by which the heritage of Hellenism was made part of the higher culture of the peoples of northern Europe. Moreover, this Hellenic achievement became the basis for the culture of the Eastern Roman Empire centered in Byzantium, and, through the Greek language, the Byzantine Empire spread a Greek form of Christianity to the peoples of eastern Europe and the Near East. In fact, the acceptance of Christianity by the

Roman Empire and the transfer of the capital of the Empire from Rome to Byzantium were almost coincidental in time with each other, both occurring within the first thirty years of the fourth century. Belloc therefore is quite one-sided in his conception of what the Roman Empire and its culture consisted.

Equally striking for one who is an apologist for the Catholic faith is his statement that the Roman Empire imparted universality to the Catholic Church — “The religion which it [the Empire] made as universal as itself...”

We have already seen how Belloc restricts the universality of the Catholic Church by claiming that “The Faith is Europe. And Europe is the Faith.” But here, before Europe, in the sense of Western Christendom, had even been brought into existence — a joint work of Christianity and the Roman Empire in transmitting of the Hellenic heritage — he has so little recognition of historical reality as to claim that the Catholic Church was not universal until the Roman Empire made it so.

In fact, before the Empire decided to accept Christianity after two and a half centuries of actively persecuting it, the Catholic Faith had been universal enough to spread beyond the borders of the Roman Empire in Mesopotamia and Parthis, and to make converts of the peoples of the Near East and North Africa, and especially among the centers of Greek culture in Greece itself and in Asia Minor. Most of all, it had been able to assimilate the Greek cultural heritage and use it for its own purposes. Belloc has to ignore all of this rich development, testifying to the universal appeal of Catholicism for many different peoples, in order to make Rome the source of the universality of the Catholic Church.

Edward Gibbon was one of Belloc’s favorite writers and Belloc frequently returned to reading him. Gibbon was himself a great admirer of the Roman Empire and its achievements; and his history is a long drawn-out lament for its decline and fall. Gibbon ascribes the downfall of the Empire to the twin causes of barbarism and Christianity — the latter weakening the Empire from within like a vampire, the former overrunning its defenses from without. Belloc also is a great devotee of the Roman Empire, but he grants Christianity a more positive role than Gibbon. Nevertheless, he subordinates Christianity to Rome, by claiming that it was only through Rome that the Christian Faith was able to become universal. Thus there is not too much to choose between Gibbon and Belloc when it comes to setting aside

the true significance of the Catholic Church in comparison with their exaltation of the importance of Rome. One makes the Church an insidious influence for the destruction of the Roman Empire; the other so depreciates the Church as to make its universality merely a creation of the Roman Empire and thus dependent on the Empire for its basic character.

Rome And The Germanic Peoples

Belloc's view of history as expressed in *Europe and the Faith* is essentially conditioned by his controversial purposes and must be seen and judged against that background. As has been noted by literary critics, Belloc has an excellent style, and his presentation of his facts is very convincing. He argues clearly and logically. And the position against which he is arguing helps to give force and direction to the way in which he marshals his facts. Thus we are led to ignore those elements in history which Belloc passes over in silence. We tend to think of such elements, if we know them at all, as inconsequential if they are not important to Belloc. In many cases, however, they are vitally important and often have a bearing upon the thesis which Belloc is attempting to establish.

Here is one such element, which Belloc refers to in a way that leads us to assume that what he is saying is an obvious truth: "Hence all our original documents and prayers are Greek and shine with a Greek light: nor are any so essentially Greek in idea as the four Catholic Gospels." (*Europe and the Faith*, p. 26)

It so happens that all four gospels were (probably) originally written in the Greek *koine*'; but the events they record and the teaching they give all deal with the words and actions of a Jewish teacher from Galilee who is the fulfillment of the Jewish Messianic expectations. He identified Himself as the Son of Man (a term derived from the Jewish Book of Daniel) and as being one with the Father, who was known to the Jewish people through the Old Testament. All the teachings of Jesus have to be seen against the Jewish environment in which He did His preaching. It was the task of the Christian Church to reach out to the Gentiles with

this Jewish message of salvation. Belloc simply ignores this tremendous historical fact, and tries to lead us to do so as well.

It would seem that Belloc is relying upon a 19th century liberal Protestant view of St. John's Gospel — but he also adds the other three as well — as dealing with Greek ideas. As closer examination was made of this gospel, its strongly Jewish character became evident. Why Belloc had to rely upon the discredited liberal Protestant interpretation — now applied by him not to one gospel, but to all four — is somewhat of a mystery — until we recall Belloc's strong dislike of the Jews. Belloc would have preferred a Church that had its origins in Greece or Rome rather than in Judea.

Now let us see the view of history which Belloc is controverting, against which his arguments in *Europe and the Faith* are marshalled. Here is Belloc's statement of that view and his own conception is response to it:

To neglect the truth that the Roman Empire with its institutions and its spirit was the sole origin of European civilization; to forget or to diminish the truth that the Empire accepted in its maturity a certain religion; to conceal the fact that this religion was not a mood but a determinate and highly organized corporation; to exaggerate the insignificant barbaric influences which came from outside the Empire and did nothing to modify its spirit; to pretend that the Empire or its religion have at any time ceased to be... all these pretensions are part of one historical falsehood.

In all by which we Europeans differ from the rest of mankind there is nothing which was not originally peculiar to the Roman Empire or is not demonstrably derived from something peculiar to it.

Belloc then specifies a wide range of material objects, kinds of building, and implements, which he sees Europe as having derived from Rome, and certain basic institutions, among which he speaks of the “universities, the parliaments, the courts of law, and their jurisprudence.” He tells us that “all these derive entirely from the old Roman Empire, our wellspring,” and then adds, “It may here be ob-

jected that to connect so closely the worldly foundations of our civilization with the Catholic or universal religion of it is to limit the latter and to make of it a merely human thing.”

He dismisses this objection in these words: “The accusation would be historically valueless in any case, for in history we are not concerned with the claims of the supernatural but with a sequence of proved events in the natural order.”

Now what are we to say to these sweeping claims of Belloc, which leave no originality or inventiveness to the peoples of the West under the influence of Christianity and the development of their own cultural traditions? Instead, he attributes everything of value to the Roman Empire and what it managed to pass on in its declining phase of disaster and disorder. Does this not make the Christian Faith of little or no influence on the development of society and culture? Does this not imply that it is barren of any creative power, and can serve only as a transmission belt for what Rome has given to it? Is it really necessary to conduct controversy along these lines, rather than trying to discover a more balanced view of the matter?

In fact, what Belloc does, in these passages we have cited, is to make no distinction between the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church. For, after listing the different and widespread contributions of which he tells us Rome is the originator, he then mentions the objection that he has thus closely connected “the worldly foundations of our civilization with the Catholic or universal religion of it.” But throughout he has been speaking of the Roman Empire as the source of these important elements in Western culture, not the Catholic religion. Now, however, he simply identifies the two. So, while he has claimed earlier that Europe is the Faith, he is here implying that the Roman Empire is the Faith. Because of his love and admiration for Rome, he wants to make the Catholic religion merely an attribute of *Romanitas*, having no independent existence or influence of its own. And this sort of disregard of basic differences between one institution and another really distorts the whole of European History. It leaves no room for a careful examination of the various factors which helped to develop the unique character of civilization in the West. The difficulty with Belloc is that he looks backward toward

Rome, and thus fails to grasp the richness and originality of Western culture, and the different contributions which the peoples of the West have brought to it.

Here is Belloc's presentation of his own view of what happened at the time of the decline of the Roman Empire — he will not say downfall, since for Belloc the Empire never really fell.

[It] was an internal revolution; it did not come from without. It was a change from within: it was nothing remotely resembling an external, still less a barbaric conquest.

All that happened was that Roman civilization, having grown very old, failed to maintain that vigorous and universal method of local government, subordinated to the capital, which it had for four or five hundred years supported. The machinery of taxation gradually weakened; the whole of central bureaucratic action weakened; the greater men in each locality began to acquire a sort of independence; and sundry soldiers, benefited by the slow (and enormous) change, occupied the local "palaces," as they were called, of Roman administration, secured such revenues as the remains of Roman taxation could give them, and, conversely, had thrust upon them so much of the duty of government as the decline of civilization could still maintain.

That is what happened, and that is all that happened. (pp. 59-60)

What does Belloc leave out of this account, so that he can dismiss the significance of the barbarian invasions of the Empire? Note his statement, "It was nothing remotely resembling an external, still less a barbaric, conquest." When reading this, one is struck by the power which Belloc attributes to dogmatic assertion; and he can be quite successful if one knows nothing of the history of the events he is describing and has not read any other writers on the subject. It is characteristic of Belloc, by the way, that he rarely identifies a historian of the school whose views he is controverting. And although he tells us that this older school has collapsed before the advent of a new school of historians based upon

a scientific study of the past, he does not tell us who these historians are. If these new historians are in basic agreement with his own views, why is he reluctant to identify them?

As to the events which Belloc ignores in telling us “That is what happened, and that is all that happened,” so that the empire will be seen as undergoing simply smooth and natural decline, here are some of them:

1. The fifty years of disastrous civil wars between 235 and 284, the period of the so-called barracks emperors gaining power through the support of their own army, and being overthrown in a short time, in most cases, by the armies of some other contender for the throne. It was this period which broke the back of the older Empire and made it impossible to restore the cooperation between the middle class of the cities and the power of the emperor, which had been the previous foundation of imperial power. Now, it was to the armies and the bureaucracy that the emperors looked for support.
2. The transformation of the Empire under Diocletian and Constantine in which the power of the bureaucracy became ever greater and the taxation almost too great to be borne, so that many citizens tried to flee from their occupations in order to escape from it.
3. The reorganization of the imperial palace upon Oriental models in which the power of the Emperor was supreme and was surrounded by an aura of sacredness.
4. The breakthrough of the Empire’s frontiers at Adrianople in Thrace in 378, at a battle in which the Visigoths thoroughly defeated the Roman army and killed the Roman Emperor, Valins, who led this army. This was the key to allowing the barbarian peoples to take over large parts of the Roman Empire.

In 396 St. Jerome, with an eloquence derived from his classical education, gave this account of what had occurred when the barbarians invaded the Empire. Note that this was fourteen years before the capture of Rome itself by the Visigoths.

How the mind shudders to contemplate the catastrophes of our age! For more than twenty years, Roman blood has drenched the lands between Constantinople and the Julian Alps. Scythia, Thrace, Macedonia, Dalmatia and the provinces of Pannonia have been devastated, plundered, and violated by tribes of Goths, Huns, Vandals and Marcomanni. How many matrons, how many of God's virgins and ladies of noble birth have been made the playthings of these brutes! Bishops are imprisoned; priests and other religious massacred; churches demolished, horses stabled on the altars of Christ, the bones of martyrs disinterred and scattered. 'Everywhere grief, everywhere weeping and lamentation, everywhere death in all his many images.'

From these barbarian disasters the East at first appeared immune, and was merely perturbed by the reports coming from the West, when behold only last year these savage wolves, swarming down from the distant Caucasian rocks — not from Arabia but the far north — in short order overran whole European provinces. So many monasteries captured, so many rivers flowed red with human blood! Antioch was besieged, along with many other cities. Entire armies were hauled away as captives; terror-stricken, Arabia and Phoenicia, Palestine and Egypt imagined themselves already seized.

— Letter of St. Jerome
(Regnery, 1956)

A generation later, a friend and companion of St. Augustine, Possidius, describes the catastrophe which overwhelmed the Church in North Africa during the last years of St. Augustine — he died in 430:

It was not long after this, however, that, by God's will and providence, there poured into Africa from across the sea in ships from Spain a huge host of savage enemies armed with every kind of weapon and trained to war. There were Vandals and Alans, mixed with one of the Goth-

ic peoples, and individuals of various nations. They overran the country — spreading all over Mauretania and passing on to our other Provinces and territories. There was no limit to their savage atrocities and cruelties. Everything they could reach they laid waste, with their looting, murders, tortures of all kinds, burnings, and countless other unspeakable crimes. They spared neither age nor sex, nor the very priests and ministers of God, nor the ornaments and vessels of the churches, nor the buildings.

These days, therefore, that he lived through, or endured, almost at the very end of his life, were the bitterest and most mournful of all his old age. A man such as he had to see cities overthrown and destroyed and, with them, their citizens and inhabitants and the buildings on their estates wiped out by a murderous enemy, and others put to flight and scattered. He saw churches denuded of priests and ministers; holy virgins and others vowed to chastity dispersed, some among them succumbing to tortures, others perishing by the sword, others taken captive and losing innocence of soul and body, and faith itself, in evil and cruel slavery to their foes.

— Quoted in *Religion and World History* (Image, 1975)

These, then, are contemporary witnesses to what occurred when the military power of the Roman Empire collapsed before the invasions of the many different barbarian peoples. They bring home to us the reality of what the Christian people had to endure in this time of great trial, which Cardinal Newman describes as the Judgment of God upon Greco-Roman society. Newman seems to share Belloc's view concerning the greatness of Rome, for he speaks of her as "the noblest earthly power that ever was." But he does not share Belloc's desire to minimize the disasters of the invasions, for he speaks of them as "hurling down and smashing into fragments" the power of the Roman Empire.

Let us conclude this article with a statement by an outstanding American authority on the Middle Ages, James Westfall Thimpson. He writes:

But one who tries to look into the depths of these centuries from no special point of view, but from every possible angle, will find in the efforts being made to save Europe from complete ruin, and even to build it up again anew, much evidence that the human spirit was alive. It was above all an age of pioneers who, because no education could be had outside the Church, and because there was no other civilizing institution, were for the most part churchmen. Popes and monks and bishops were forging the new instruments of a new culture. They were never without the support of the barbarian kings, while in the remnants of towns and in the country simple artisans and peasants were bearing their share of responsibility by the production of the material means to support life. The decline of ancient civilization was somehow checked, and under the auspices of the Church, Roman and German institutions were fused to form a new civilization.

— *An Introduction to Medieval Europe, 300-1500* (WW. Norton, 1937)

The key, then, to this period is the interaction between Roman and Germanic elements which eventually produced the outstanding achievements of later medieval civilization. Not the attempt to make the Germanic peoples alone responsible for these achievements, nor Belloc's attempt to annex everything for Rome in a kind of Roman cultural imperialism over the new peoples of the West, but a careful and unprejudiced examination of what was actually achieved and how it was that this came about. +

— *John Mulloy writes from Fayetteville, Arkansas.*

Notes