



The World in the Middle Ages: An Historical Geography

Adolphus Louis Køppen

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An excerpt from the *Princeton Review*, Volume 27:

THE most familiar fact to everyone at all acquainted with contemporary writings and opinions in relation to the Middle Ages, is, that they run very much into extremes, alternately describing that mysterious period as one of unbroken darkness or unclouded light, perceptibly higher or immeasurably lower, as to some particulars at least of intellectual and moral condition, than the times immediately before and after.

The primary cause of this extravagance is no doubt to be sought in the excitement of controversy between Protestants and Papists, both in the age of the Reformation, and at every later period, when that warfare has been renewed or carried on with more than wonted vigour; so that neither party has been able or willing for the time to admit any truth whatever in the statements of the other, lest the yielding of an outpost should involve the capture or surrender of the citadel.

The lapse of time, instead of weakening the tendency to these extremes, has served to strengthen them, by changing temporary movements into habits, and by causing violent reaction to intensify the impulses themselves.

The extreme of partiality or favor to the medieval church ——— for it is only in this ecclesiastical aspect that we now present the subject—may be more particularly represented as arising partly from a self-defensive movement on the part of Rome and her admirers, but also from causes of more recent origin, connected with extensive changes in prevailing modes of thought and standards of comparison.

One of these later causes is the powerful propensity, especially among the Germans, to unsettle everything established, and to give the benefit of every doubt to what is new and paradoxical; a disposition nurtured, if it is not generated, by the national methods of instruction, and especially by that excessive rivalry of teachers in the same institutions, which is one of the most characteristic features of the German universities, and which, by creating a perpetual demand for something new, as an attraction to the student, for whose patronage the teachers are competing, often leads men who know better to violate their own convictions, both of truth and duty, with as little scruple or compunction as a school-boy feels, in taking what he knows to be the wrong side of a question, in a juvenile debating club. To this morbid appetite for novelty and paradox, a daintier bait could not have been presented than the hope of revolutionizing old opinions, even among Protestants, in reference to what have long been known as the “Dark Ages,” but which these reckless demonstrators, by their *novum organum* of antiquarian and critical research, have not the slightest difficulty in evincing to have been light ages in comparison with ours, to their own satisfaction, or at least to that of many readers. For we have a shrewd suspicion that some of the most popular discoveries of this kind, and the most unquestionable in the estimation of the younger Germans and the weaker Germano-laters, are not believed at all by those who broach them, but propounded as mere tests and triumphs of inventive genius, or of logical and dialectic skill—first in the *auditorium* or lecture room, and then, by a transition almost certain and invariable, through the press.

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