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Editor's Notebook: Our Medieval Adversaries

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Our Medieval Adversaries



In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, a flurry of articles and commentaries attempted to explain the terrorists' thinking to a bewildered American public. Why, everyone asked, do these people hate us? The answers were usually presented in terms of contrasts and dichotomies. We were told that there are two kinds of religion: those that are hardline and dogmatic (theirs) and those that are progressive and tolerant (ours), as well as two kinds of societies: those that hold a single world view (theirs) and those that are pluralistic (ours). New York Times columnist Thomas J. Friedman explained the difference in terms of outlook: "The real clash today is...not between civilizations but within them—between those Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews with a modern and progressive outlook and those with a medieval one." In a similar vein, Times columnist Maureen Dowd affirmed that "America's new foes in Afghanistan are clinging to a medieval mindset." These writers thus invoked history as a way of framing the contrast between "us" and "them": a modern, enlightened, progressive outlook or mindset versus one that is medieval, superstitious and barbaric.

In fact, "medieval" seems to pop up whenever a shorthand term is needed for "backward," "bigoted," or "feudal"—the opposite of civilized. Yet this definition is very much at odds with the picture of the Middle Ages presented by Geoffrey Chaucer, the medieval writer most familiar to the English-speaking world. Although there are plenty of scoundrels among the 29 pilgrims on the road to Canterbury Cathedral, no religious fanatics or potential suicide bombers are to be found among them. Chaucer's Knight has participated in crusades, yet he never mentions "holy war" or glories in the destruction of infidels. Meek in his bearing, noble and gentlemanly,

he is described as a man who values chivalry, truth and honor. His tale, far from glorifying the shedding of heathen blood, explores the issues of fate and fortune. Chaucer himself comes across as skeptical, tolerant, and amused by the human comedy he observes.

Of course, it might be argued that Chaucer was not "typically medieval." He was, after all, well-educated and well-read, a cosmopolitan member of the merchant class and a courtier. But during the 1,000 years (5th – 15th centuries) which we refer to as the Middle Ages, there must have been many men and women who shared his temperament and view of life. I suspect that

people in the Middle Ages were no more uniform in their "outlook" or their "mindset" than people are today. Judging from such diverse Chaucerian creations as the lustful Wife of Bath, the earthy Miller and the hardworking Plowman, medieval people probably held a wide range of attitudes and beliefs.

Dividing history into clearly defined periods, each with its own identifying characteristics, simplifies the task of understanding the past. Many of us learned that the Middle Ages were "dark," while the Renaissance was a period of "rebirth." The Victorians were prudish, smug and obsessed with respectability. In recent years, however, scholars have begun to question this tidy division into cultural periods, each with its supposed underlying identity. The more we investigate, it seems, the less coherent and neatly differentiated these historical periods are.

But perhaps historically-based characterizations are too useful to be abandoned. In our struggle to understand the minds of the terrorists, distant precedents may be more reassuring than recent ones. Although the "outlooks" and "mindsets" of the Islamic fundamentalists are in some respects much closer to those of Hitler and Stalin than to anything the Middle Ages produced, labeling them as "medieval" places them at a comfortable distance. We are more advanced, more civilized. Thus, as medieval scholar Lee Patterson observed, the Middle Ages fulfills its role as a symbol of "premodernity," of "the other that must be rejected" so that Americans of the twenty-first century may reaffirm our sense of who we are.

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