

Lecture One
Freehand Charity of the 14th Century

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When we look about us today and see so many problems that are pressing for solution we are somewhat inclined to be overcome by the tax which is being made upon us, and almost ready to give up in despair. The man who is particularly interested in the religious advance of the community, becomes discouraged because people do not look upon that aspect of life with as great seriousness as he does. The charity-agent becomes gloomy because so many of his noble intentions come to naught and people do not seem to appreciate his motives. The labor reformer becomes excited and worried because his just demands are not always clearly seen by the employer. The employer is unable to see what right the laboring man has to interfere with his business and he becomes the {??} of evil times. The truth is that we are all liable to become confused, and hardly know whether we are rowing with the current or against it. Under such conditions it is a capital time to look back and get our bearings, and find out the significant things that have happened. There are three movements in our life at present that are attracting wide attention. We speak of modern religion, modern charity, and modern labor problems, as if they were peculiar to our age, and as if nothing that has ever happened in the past can throw light upon them. But as a matter of fact they are the same old problems, only it happens that they appear under new conditions.

The persistent use of the word "modern" even to the extent of speaking of a "modern world," has in it a great truth, and one can trace the steps by which this modern world has evolved from the old. If we take any line of development we can follow with more or less clearness the growth of tendencies which distinguish the world of today. In these lectures which I have outlined I hope to trace the change. To sum it all up in one word, it is a change from autocracy to democracy. It is the change for a world in

which the institution was the important thing, and little attention was paid to the value of the individual person. He was valuable only as he served as a part of the material which built up the great institution, whether it was the Holy Roman Empire or the Holy Catholic Church. In the world of today the theory is quite different no matter how far short we fall of our ideal in common practice, the fact still remains that we are living under the principle of a "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

This idea of a "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people" is the ideal under which we are living in this year of our Lord, 1905, in these United States. It is a vast step in advance over the conception of a government of the people, by the church, and for the church. It is the history of this change, as it is clearly set forth in these three general topics that I have chose for centers of interest, that I wish to show forth. The general subject of charity will give an outline of the gradual change which has taken place in the attitude of those people who have controlled the wealth and culture of the world towards those who have had but little of money, wealth, or comfort.

The general subject of Religious Authority will take upon itself the task of presenting the change of men's minds in regard to what is the final authority in religious life.

The general subject of the labor problem will attempt to show the history of the noble heroic struggle that has been made by those who have said, "We do not want your alms, or your patronage. We want our just rights, and we will have them." All of these will show how in course of six or seven hundred years the hard and fast lines which divided men up into classes in the old world have been gradually weathering away, and more and more we are building our world in which a man's a man for all that, and a common interest, and a common purpose are cementing us into one great nation in which the value of a human life shall be greater than any institution, in which all institutions shall exist only as they serve to promote and enhance the moral and social well-being of the individual.

It is difficult to arrive at any just conception of any period of history, perhaps it is especially difficult to understand those years which we speak of as the Dark Ages, and the years following which culminate in the great reformation.

If we set up our historical transit at the year 1302, we are very near to the turning point between the old world and the new. In that year 1302 Pope Boniface VIII issued the famous Bull in which the claim of the Papacy to be the supreme spiritual and temporal power of the world are set forth. Let me quote from that document,

When the apostles say, "Behold here are two swords" [Luke 22:38]... the Lord did not reply that this was too much, but enough. Surely he who denies that the temporal sword is in the power of Peter wrongly interprets the word of the Lord when he says "Put up thy sword in its scabbard" [Matthew 26:52]. Both swords, the spiritual and the material, therefore are in the power of the Church; the one indeed to be wielded for the Church, the other by the Church; the one by the hand of the Priest, the other by the hand of Kings and Knights, but at the will and sufferance of the Priest.¹

This is a tremendous claim, the claim to rule by divine right over all manner of men from the lowest to the highest, and clearly to avow that the purpose is "for the church." At this point then let us set up our transit, and take a backward look.

¹ Pope Boniface VIII (1230-1303), born Benedetto Caetani, was head of the Catholic Church from 1294 until his death in 1303. In 1302 he issued the Papal Bull, *Unam Sanctam*, a portion of which is translated here. Earl Davis includes this reference: "(1) From Henderson's *Translations of the Hist. Doc. Of Mid. Ages*. P. 435. Cited in Adams' *Medieval Civilization*, p. 395." Full references to these works are:

Ernest F. Henderson, editor and translator, *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*, London: George Bell and sons, 1905.

George Burton Adams, *Civilization During the Middle Ages, Especially in Relation to Modern Civilization*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896.

But before taking a backward look it will be necessary to find out the kind of ground upon which we are placing our instruments. In this year of our Lord 1302, we can get something of an estimate of the conditions under which men lived. The feudal system of civilization was still outwardly in full force. I cannot presume to give an exposition of that system which shall include all its varying details. But I can give approximately the ideal of feudalism, which was in general all actual fact. If we begin with the Pope who claimed control of all the earth, we shall have a system something like a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid is the Pope. Next below him is the Emperor, who is amendable to the Pope. Then next in order comes the Kings of the various states, who are in theory amendable to the Emperor, but as a matter of fact the Kings were the weakest factors of the feudal state. Below the Kings were the Feudal Barons, Dukes or Counts. These Feudal Barons were the centers of actual power in the feudal ages. They were overlords of a more-or-less clearly defined territory. In theory, and in practice, the Barons were the owners of the land over which they ruled.

The Baron divided his territory into smaller sections, and rented it to Vassals in consideration of which they paid him in taxes, and in products of the soil, and in military service, in proportion to the strength and extent of his Baronetcy. These Vassals subdivided their territory to still smaller sections, and sublet these sections to what were known as Arriere Vassals, who lived upon the land, and bore the same relative relations to the Vassal proper, that the Vassal did to the Baron.

But the division did not stop here. The Arriere Vassal again divided his section into still smaller sections, which were sublet to Knights. Each of these small sections was supposed to be large enough to support and arm a single warrior of the noble condition.

Up to this point we have been dealing with the nobility. We now come to a point when the Knight sublet small plots of land to the peasants or serfs, who bound themselves to the service of the Knight, as the Knight was bound to the Vassal, and the Vassal to the Baron. The serf, or peasant, did the work, raised the crops, and contributed to the

support of this vast superstructure of warriors who deemed it dishonorable to do work of any kind. His sole object and aim of living was to fight, drink and be merry.

But the Church itself was the owner of a larger proportion of the land, so that in some countries as large a proportion of the land as 1/3 of it was actually owned by the Church. Instead of Barons are Bishops at the head of the Baronetcy, and overlord of the Vassals, Knights, and serfs. In this capacity the Bishop was a mere temporal ruler exercising the same rights and duties as the Feudal Lord.

Such was the general plan of the temporal power of feudal Europe. The entire superstructure of Lords, Knights, and Vassals, Bishops, Kings and their servants rested upon the shoulders of the serfs.

But parallel to this temporal Kingdom, there was the representatives of the spiritual Kingdom, the Pope at the head. He divided up the world for its spiritual well-being into the great metropolitan districts, which was under the direction of the Arch Bishop. The Metropolitan was divided into Dioceses. Over each diocese was a Bishop. The Bishop delegated his powers to, and received allegiance from, the Arch Deacon, who in term was Lord of the Arch-Priest. The Arch-Priest, was the direct regulator of the Priests or secular clergy, who alone came into direct relations with the people by giving the sacraments. If we interfuse this feudal system with the increasingly large number of monastic institutions, which are of the same nature and character as the little states ruled by the Barons and Bishops, we will have a tolerably complete idea of the conditions of society at the beginning of the 14th century in the year of our Lord 1302, when Pope Boniface VIII declared that the Chair of St. Peter was ruler over both temporal and spiritual swords.

The free peasants and serfs, while they nominally rented the land on which they lived, were still bound to the lord, and could not move at will from place to place in order to better their conditions. They were virtually slaves for the Lords and Bishops who owned the land on which they toiled

more, more also the administrators of justice within the district.

The entire system might be illustrated by comparing it to what would be the condition here if the State of Mass. were a Baronetcy ruled over and owned by the Feudal Baron, corresponding to our Governor. The counties would be leased to the Vassals, the Vassal overlords of the county would lease to the Arriere Vassals, the townships, and the owners of the township would lease great estates to the Knights, and the Knights would sublet the estates into small plots of land to the serfs.

To fully appreciate the conditions of this period, it is necessary to remember some of the regulating customs of feudalism.

The rights of the Lord over the free villain may be described ... as covering every form of claim which ... force could exact <and custom sanction>. They began with an annual tax on land, followed by another on crops. Then came others upon the beasts of burden, upon sales, and every form of commercial transaction, upon the circulation of persons and goods, upon inheritances, servile or free, and upon every act in the administration of justice... the right of entertainment..., of seizing horses, wagons, or any other necessities for the journey...

Especially burdensome were the rights of corvée by which the free peasant as well as the serf must give a certain number of days' work in the year, with beasts and wagons for the repair of public roads, or the cultivation of the lord's domain. He was in momentary danger of being called for such military service... as his conditions permitted; in default of such service <he had to> pay a fine in money... Finally he was bound to bake his bread in his Lord's oven, grind his grain at his Lord's mill, and press his grapes in his lord's wine-press, paying, of course, for the privilege; if he wanted to chase or cut wood in the forest, or fish in the stream or feed his cattle in the pasture, ... he must pay a tax. ... He may not even sell the remnants of

crops which survived this accumulation of taxes, until those of the lord have been sold at the highest market price. (Emerton *Med. Europe* P. 518.)

After the lord had squeezed the peasant almost to the point of extinction, came the Church with its even more effectual agencies of terror and superstition. Its principle exaction was the tithe, a tax of one-tenth upon the products of agriculture, a burden sufficient if rigidly exacted, to ruin any field industry. But not content with this, the Church, like the feudal seignior, profited by every special occasion, birth, baptism, marriage, death, to collect new contributions.²

The nobility and the church as well were immoral and licentious to their very marrow. As temporal rulers the clergy had misused their powers, and had become but parasites feeding upon the laboring peasants. During the crusades enormous sums of money were sucked out of every European diocese each year for the purpose of paying expenses of war.

"The hungry sheep look up and are not fed" says Milton.³ The Church which should have cared for their physical well-being was engaged in bleeding them so that the Bishop might live in ease, luxury and stolidness, like the Arch-Bishop of Denmark who never went anywhere with a smaller escort than 500 armed attendants.

The pastors were the first to enter, and the last to leave the taverns, and were always stout fellows at the drunken bout. In their drunken orgies they often revealed the secrets of the confessional. In the larger houses the monastic income was wasted in the entertainment, not of poor wayfarers and needy pilgrims, but of lords and their

² Ephraim Emerton (1851-1935), author of *Mediaeval Europe (814-1300)*. Boston: Ginn & Co., 1895. This quote is from page 518. Earl Davis appears to have added a few, basically inconsequential, words to this text which I have indicated in angle brackets, <>.

³ John Milton (1608-1674), from his poem *Lycidas*.

followers. The clergy were ignorant, and very rarely did a Bishop preach, so completely was his time occupied in other affairs.

Such in general is the condition of Europe in the beginning of the 14th century. But beneath these forms there were already forces at work which as the years advanced proved to be sufficiently great to create reforms and out of these ruins of the old to reconstruct a new world.

I wish to point out what those forces were. In order to do so, it will be necessary to recall certain facts of history. At the beginning of our era, about the time that Jesus lived, a great transformation in the world's history was going on. In the first place, the Grecian civilization had reached its zenith. It had produced poets, artists, philosophers. It had devoted itself to the speculative side of life. It had lacked the power of government but Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, had lived and had taught the world the great lesson of the value, necessity and delight of thinking and studying and speculating. Knowledge was their great contribution.

On the other hand, the Jewish people were by nature religious. They cared little for speculation, or philosophy, had never been great organizers. Military conquests were beyond them, and they fell prey to the great conquering nations of the East, and West. But in the midst of all this they had remained true to their genius, and with a heroism which is forever the glory of the Jewish [people] they had clung to their one great truth, that there is one God, and he is a God of righteousness.

The glory of Greece had departed leaving behind its great record of philosophy and love for truth. Israel was still hoping for the great messianic revival, and Rome, the very incarnation of the genius of Government and organization was master of the world. She had conquered and could still conquer.

Greece could think, but could not rule. Israel could worship, but could not think or rule. Rome would conquer or govern, but she never gave the world a great philosopher or a great moral prophet.

For two hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the fusion and amalgamation of these three great genius forces were going on. Silently, and unconsciously the one was being merged into the other, so that we could hardly realize what had taken place, were it not for the fact that our Old Testament contains traces of this new influence in the Jewish life. In the person of Jesus we have the first teacher and prophet of this new civilization based upon the thinking genius of the Greek, and the worshipping genius of the Jew, and destined to be blended with the organizing and governing genius of the Romans. This new civilization somewhat changed from the simplicity of Jesus, grows and develops into the Catholic Church of the Roman Empire. This Catholic Church of the Roman Empire culminates at the council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. From that time our Church continues to grow, but the Roman Empire is waning.

Fifty years later, 376. The great German tribes crossed the Danube frontier, and forced themselves into the Roman world. This crossing the Danube in 376 A.D. and the Battle of Hadrianople in 378⁴ are the beginnings of the permanent occupation of the Roman Empire by the German Barbarians. By 476 the Roman Empire was a thing of the past, and the future of Christianity and western civilization was in the hands of these barbarian tribes, the Germans. The Germans became converted to Christianity.

The conditions presented by the uncivilized Germans entering into the influence of Roman Christianity was somewhat similar to what we might expect if some Indian family should suddenly be transplanted into the midst of a modern private mansion, with all its utilitarian and artistic equipment. All the worth of the articles, their uses, their significance their value for life would be unappreciated. The same conditions prevailed when the Germans first entered into the {???) structure of Roman Civilization. They saw, they touched, they used many of the implements of civilized life, but they did not understand,

⁴ Today more commonly called the Battle of Adrianople. The battle was fought between the Germanic Visigoths and the Roman army commanded by the Emperor Valens. The Romans were defeated.

or appreciate. Everything, religion, {??} and customs that they adopted were superficial and were adornments.

But the Germans were a great people. They had power of activity and initiative and latent capacities that were destined to achieve great things. So the power of thought and philosophy which the Greeks had contributed to the power of worship which the Jews had contributed, to the power of government which the Romans had contributed, the Germans were about to add a fourth great element to western civilization. Born as lovers of freedom, accustomed to the unrestrained freedom of their wild life, where each man must stand on his own merits and fight to retain his own life and integrity, these Germans bought that power which in time was destined to overthrow the great governmental system of Rome, and out of its ruins, erect the government of the people, for the people and by the people. The Germans contributed that great emphasis upon individual freedom and the value of a man as a man.

Says Adams in his *Medieval Civilization*,

Besides the addition of themselves, they brought with them as a decided characteristic of the race, a very high idea of personal independence, of the value and importance of the individual man as compared with the state.⁵

It took many years for the Germans to assimilate these forces, and the years in which the forces of Greek thought, Roman genius for government and the Jewish genius for moral religion to become absorbed and work its way into the very nature of these liberty-loving Germans. These years of absorption and silent assimilation we speak of as the dark ages. Just what was happening during these dark ages may be compared to that which happens between the time the seed is put in the ground and when it first appears above the surface with its first tender leaves.

This appearance of this new life above the surface in a plant which was to produce the fruit of a democratic nation

⁵ George Burton Adams, *Civilization During the Middle Ages, Especially in Relation to Modern Civilization*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896. p. 90.

begins during the fourteenth century. We have set up our transit of historic inspection at the year 1302 on the soil of feudalism, and taken our look backward to get the line of direction, and are now about ready to glance forward. I pass now to consider that which is the subject in particular of our lecture tonight, viz. the attitude of the nobility towards the peasant class. We have, as you remember, on one side the peasants by whose labor and efforts the great system of secular and Church nobility were supported, and on the other side the feudal hierarchy and ecclesiastical hierarchy which presumed to rule and control the religious, social and industrial life of these peasants.

Between these two classes there was an almost impossible barrier. If course from time to time the chasm was spanned, especially on the ecclesiastical side, where many priests arose from the peasants into the ranks of church activities.

But in the great activities of the middle ages when Barons were continually at war, when the Church was engaged in building great cathedrals and monasteries, and carrying on the great crusades to recover Jerusalem from the pagans, the peasants, who bore the expense of it all, had been forgotten. So far as any interest in their lives was concerned it consisted only in the amount of work that they might do towards supporting the nobility and clergy in their works. An interesting side-light is cast upon the position which they occupied in the minds of the churchmen, by the plans which we have of the old monasteries in which the servants quarters were placed side-by-side with the stables for horses, swine, sheep and other animals. They were regarded as a sort of animal that contributed to the support and maintenance of the nobility and clergy, the state and Church. In themselves, as human beings, they were as if they did not exist.

It is for this reason that I have called this lecture, "The Free Hand Charity of the 14th Century." The peasants were squeezed to the point of death by taxation, by tithes for the church, by fees for birth, Baptism, marriage and death. As a result they were left in the most hopeless poverty, not only as to the plain needs of the body but as

to the needs of the mind and their religious nature. When their physical condition became such that they could no longer stand the burden they were given the scraps of their secular and religious lords feasting, in a manner which said as plainly as possible, "Of course we do not care for you, and these things belong to us by Divine right, but behold our generous Christian charity in thus giving." The religion, the education, the plain physical wants of life had been taken from the poor peasants under the cloak and seal of the Divine right to rule, and from time-to-time were parsimoniously handed back to them in crumbs from the table in sacraments of the Church, and in the shoddy preaching of the medieval priest. In this alms giving of bread, religion and knowledge, there was nothing of the spirit of interest in, and sympathy for, the peasant as a human being. It was the cold freehand gift of arrogance, resting not upon Christian love, but upon a degrading conception of legal duty.

But already there had been a recognition of these evils, and in the early years of the thirteenth century, the great mendicant religious orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans, realizing the evils of the Church as a great worldly power, and the sufferings of the peasants were organized upon an entirely new basis. Taking upon themselves the vows of chastity and poverty, these monks went over the country preaching, teaching and ministering unto the needs of the rich and poor alike. Not for the sake of the Church, or the state, but for the sake of the people themselves, they worked. That movement was modern and may be regarded as the swelling and breaking of the earth as the growing seed of democracy was forcing its way to the surface. But these works fell from grace, and soon found themselves the possessors of worldly goods beyond their needs, and they passed into the service of the Church, and the service of man was forgotten.

But we are on the eve of great events. Next Sunday evening I will speak of the how the authority of the Church to rule was denied and the following Sunday of how out of this denial, and through the influence of the men who denied the first great step in the reform of the peasant class was taken.