

**WTE column of August 8, 2015. Editor's headline: "Social justice fight remains"
CST of same date: "History a reminder that we can never take human dignity for granted"**

Sometimes it is instructive for us as individuals—even as societies— to inquire where we've been and where we are now. It may enable us to figure out where we want to be in future.

In this spirit I delivered a talk at United Universalist Church in Cheyenne on the Church's impact on life in the Middle Ages. My lecture was preceded by a ballad, published in 1611 (but known long before), "The Three Ravens." Further introducing my topic was an educational ten minutes addressing our youth on a book about Galileo Galilei, "Starry Messenger."

"The Three Ravens" setting is the aftermath of a battle. Scavenger birds feast on the dead. The corpse of an unnamed knight gets buried by his beloved, "great with young," who herself succumbs that evening.

The story about Galileo, while acknowledging he was put under house arrest by the powers that be, is more positive: science prevails in the end. Actual events in his life, however, were as sobering as the Three Ravens message.

By 1589, his fame having spread, Galileo was appointed to the chair of mathematics in Pisa. He perfected a rudimentary telescope, which enabled scientists to look closely at things beyond Earth. Soon Galileo championed heliocentrism, which holds that the sun is center of the universe. This went against the Church dogma that Earth was created as the center of the heavens, for the glory of God and for human edification.

Galileo was not alone in realizing that Earth was but a minor player in a larger scheme. His fellow Italian scientist, Giordano Bruno, refusing to retract his teachings, was burned at the stake in 1600. Thus, when Galileo was called before the Pope, head of the infamous Inquisition aided by Catholic rulers, he knew what was coming. He eventually recanted.

But religious strife continued, begun when Martin Luther articulated his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517. A monk at the time, Luther demanded the Church abolish its Indulgences, by which people could purchase their way into avoiding eternal hellfire. Luther's refusal to retract his writings caused the pope to expel him from the True Church while the emperor branded him an outlaw. However, other rulers of minor and major fiefdoms, the king of England among them, saw advantages to be gained in backing a religious movement based on Luther's protests. Thus the Church of England came into being and, in Germany, a Protestantism that spread north. While the new creed encouraged math and science, it failed to distance itself from the anti-Semitism of the Inquisition. Luther wrote that synagogues and Jewish homes should be destroyed and their possessions confiscated, a credo that lived on, to the undying shame of Europeans, particularly Germans, who acquiesced to Nazi atrocities a few centuries hence.

Morover, the humanism that evolved from waning church powers did not, alas, lighten the load for women and children, who were conscripted and abused as quasi-slave labor. Wise old women who healed with herbs and assisted in childbirth were denounced as witches whenever their work failed to attain the desired ends. Child mortality was a scourge, causing high birth rates and untold early maternal deaths.

What conclusions can we derive from this glance backward? First we must acknowledge that the “New World” discoveries of Christopher Columbus resulted in large-scale murder, looting, and war-profiteering not unlike those of the Crusades. Next came the slave trade, with repercussions felt to this day. The Salem witch hunts, and the persecutions of McCarthyism, are but a blink away, in terms of history. Now we have Islamofascism and its Fundamentalist-Christian counterpart.

Christianity arose in response to horrible injustices perpetuated by those in power, who remained oblivious to the suffering they caused. When the Roman empire yielded to European aristocracy, the new ruling elite turned just as greedy and voracious in appetite. The Church that had sprung up to overcome, ended up perpetuating hardship and injustice on those it was trying to save.

Feudal rule and church doctrine gave way to elected officials. Has the change been for the better? Labor laws, medical science, better nutrition: all these have improved the lives of many. Still, many remain marginalized.

Thus, any message we take from the flow of history must alert us that human dignity can never be taken for granted. It won't do to celebrate the “land of the free,” the “home of the brave,” when so many remain unfree, disenfranchised, beset by officials who are far from brave.

Here is medievalism in disguise: the school-to-prison pipeline imposed on our African American children, the laws that capriciously punish for life, our youngsters of color caught smoking a joint while their non-color coevals get a tap on the wrist. We must be ever on the alert. Today as ever, all hands are needed to effect social justice.