These were the problems Saint Benedict addressed when he set up his first monastery on Monte Cassino, south of Rome in 520, and when he drew up rules for his community in or around 529. The Benedictines may be taken as typical of all the older monastic orders. They took a life-long vow to observe obedience, poverty, and chastity. These were supported on four main precepts: no private property, no eating of butcher’s meat (except in case of sickness), steady manual labor, and strict confinement within the monastery itself.

Benedict recommended three or four hours a day to be spent reading devotional books, although he made allowance for those who couldn’t read. But everybody had to spend four or five hours a day in prayer and religious services. This public prayer became increasingly important as time went on, and the average monk did less and less manual work and concentrated on praying for his fellow men. So by a curious paradox, the monk who abandoned the world to save his own soul found that one of his major tasks was the job of interceding with Heaven on behalf of his fellow men.

The rule of Saint Benedict is a model of practical and spiritual wisdom, even to recommending how monks should sleep—they shall sleep separately in separate beds. A candle shall always be burning in their cell until early in the morning. They shall sleep clothed and girt with belts or ropes, and they shall not have their knives at their sides lest perchance in a dream they should wound the sleepers. But like a lot of great documents, the rule of Saint Benedict became in time more a statement of what should be than an indication of what actually was. Property and meat crept in; work and abstinence went out. In spite of repeated reforms, monasteries became more businesslike and more worldly. This isn’t surprising when you consider that in a troubled, violent, unsafe world monasteries and convents afforded shelter and a minimum of order and comfort to a greater extent and for longer periods of time than any other residential establishment.

The shelter wasn’t merely physical, of course. It was spiritual too. Men and women crept into monasteries out of the cold, chilled to the marrow by the wickedness and wildness outside, envisaging the cloister as a refuge where they could keep warm in the faith. They could also maintain what bits and pieces of civilization were left, copying and illustrating old manuscripts when they weren’t scraping them off to make room for something else.

And they could spread the Christian message by missionary work, not just by sending out fiery preachers, but by example. Monasteries were cited in rural areas, and it was the monks who converted illiterate and heathen peasant populations and who also probably introduced agricultural and technological improvements that were going to change the quality of life all over Europe. The Dark Ages must have been incredibly dismal, with raids and counterraid, ambushes, robberies, murder, looting, kidnapping, torture, and drunken brawls ending in bloodshed and hands and ears and noses cut off, which was considered a more Christian treatment of criminals or enemies than putting them to death. But through all this, life went on. In burgs and monasteries and fortified mansors, people maintained a minimal security. Merchants traveled on the old Roman roads. They were robbed once and twice, but they went on trading. Above all men and women went on sowing, harvesting, driving the pigs into the forest, driving the cattle out to pasture, to feed themselves and their masters as best they could. Next time we shall see how the Dark Ages came to an end, although not the darkness.

#118 The Age of Charlemagne

Even the Dark Ages were not uniformly dark. There were attempts to restore productivity and order. There was the brilliant success of a Frankish king crowned in Rome as emperor of the West. But what looks exciting to us today must have been hell to live through.

The Age of Charlemagne this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time we ended on a rather bleak note. We were in the Dark Ages, that dismal period between the sixth and the ninth centuries when violence and corruption, both physical and spiritual, were endemic in Europe. But of course history is never as neat, let alone as linear, as we like to think. At the grass roots level, great things were also happening in the Dark Ages.

Historians disagree about the exact date, but sometime between the sixth century and the tenth century, a new heavy plow with wheels began to replace the old, light plow that had been used for thousands of years. The new plow dug deep and turned over furrows instead of just scratching the topsoil the way Mediterranean plows did and
often still do. About the same time, a new method of planting came in—more complex rotation systems like the triennial system that left one field fallow once every three years to recuperate its powers. That way sheep and cattle could feed in the fallow fields and then on the stubble left in the planted fields after they had been harvested. And the manure the animals dropped could improve the crop yield further. Productive power was increasing in other ways too. This is a medieval flour mill which was made possible by the appearance of the crank, sometime during the Dark Ages. The crank, which is the most important motion transmitting device after the wheel, now turned grindstones and handmills and pulleys. This was also when water power was harnessed by water-driven mills to grind grain or cut logs and when the use of animal power was immensely improved. The ancients had been terribly inefficient in their care and use of farm animals. They had no nailed shoes which meant a lot of broken hooves and a lot of beasts limping around. And they had only a yoke harness, which was all right for oxen, but not very good for horses. They also didn’t know how to harness one animal in front of another, only abreast, which meant that great weights had to be drawn by gangs of slaves.

By the ninth century, however, the development of nailed shoes, the tandem harness, horse collars meant that one team could pull three or four times the weight that the Roman team could manage. It created a new supply of non-human power at no extra cost, doing for the tenth century what the steam engine was going to do for the nineteenth century. With this increase of productivity among north European peasants, the economic center of the continent shifted from the shores of the Mediterranean where it had been for so many centuries to the great plains between the Baltic and the North Sea and the English Channel.

Amid disorder and violence, despite disorder and violence, there was more food, there were more people, there was more activity. North Europeans were also going to surpass the people to the south in power. The extra wheat and meat the northerners produced made them bigger and stronger. The extra oats they grew permitted them to breed and feed larger horses and to build up a heavy cavalry that could use another new invention, the stirrup, which lets you sit firmly in the saddle and allowed you to charge with a lance without falling over. From the eighth century on, these new heavy-armed, heavy- armored horsemen were going to be the tanks of the medieval battlefield, stopping the Arabs at Poiiers in France in 733.

This increasing power was especially important because history is really about power: who gets it, who keeps it, who uses it, who loses it. You cannot have society without power, or culture, or art; and power is about numbers of people, but also about productivity and metals and money. After all, there are more goods available if you have cheaper and more efficient ways of producing them; more goods make it easier to fight wars and win them; and so you see, the military-industrial complex is nothing new.

The traditional metal of war is iron. Since the time of the Assyrians, the army with the most iron tends to win the war. The early Middle Ages were going to see a serious increase in the production of iron and the number of foundries. Iron continued to be pretty expensive, but there was more of it in northern Europe than around the Mediterranean. And then in the ninth century, iron became available for uses other than weapons: spade tips, plow parts, ordinary tools, when new iron mines were opened that made the metal cheaper. The brilliant success of one tribe, the Franks, was based on this new advantage in productivity. For them, as for most German tribes, war was a national institution, almost their main trait. The most important Frankish king was named Charles. History knows him as Charles the Great—Charlemagne, and he was simply the most successful representative of this warlike enterprise. He inherited the Frankish kingdom from his father, Pepin the Short, and proceeded to enlarge it. From the 770s to his death in 814, Charlemagne campaigned ceaselessly and successfully from Spain and Italy and Dalmatia to Germany and Bohemia.

Charlemagne was also an able statesman who provided his dominions with fairly effective administration based on literate clerks and on tough illiterate royal officials, military commanders with territorial responsibilities, called by titles that still survive today: dukes, from the Latin dux, meaning leader or commander; counts, from the Latin comes, a trusted companion of the king; and marquis or margrave who was the person in charge of border provinces, the marches, the march. Charles was operating in a society that produced relatively little surplus. His administrative reforms aimed at getting the land, and especially the imperial estates, to provide more of a surplus or at least setting up a structure that would permit him to cream off more of a surplus. The surplus would go towards supporting the armies which he led and which could be very large indeed, as much as twenty thousand horsemen and three times as many footmen. Now if you think just how many oats you need to feed that many horses, how many wagons you need to carry the grains and other supplies, how many supplies you need just to prepare the army for moving out, you can see the logistics of military campaigns could be pretty impressive, but so was the ultimate purpose of all this effort.
Politically, Charlemagne's aim was to revive the Roman Empire with its stability and greatness; and indeed on Christmas day in the year 800, he was, as you know, crowned in Rome as Emperor of the West. He saw himself as charged by God to restore and maintain the social order and the values this order represented, and he believed that this could best be done by reference to ancient Rome. Since architecture is often an expression of politics, you can see in the palaces and abbeys Charlemagne put up, the expression of this attempt to return to Roman sources, to revive the empire by imitating its forms, and also to spread the civilizing Christian message associated with Rome. The most effective means of instruction and edification was mural painting which offered a kind of holy comic strip of Biblical images for a largely illiterate public.

Now remember that the eighth and ninth centuries were also the time of the Iconoclastic struggle, of the tension between Rome and Constantinople, about whether religious images, icons, were good or bad. So you can see why the Pope, Leo III, thought images were essential to carry the Christian message, and why he appealed to Charlemagne to help, and how also he wound up crowning Charlemagne the emperor of the West for this and other favors. Images were also good for publicity and prestige. They could present a legendary historical background for a family or a people as was done in on of Charlemagne's palaces at Englesheim where the great hall was surrounded by paintings of the history of the Franks, as the Franks would have their history looking.

At a more sophisticated level, Charlemagne patronized the production of illustrated manuscripts and books, like this Bible; and he provided rich endowments to the clerks, scribes and illuminators who produced them and to the monasteries where these men were sheltered. Charlemagne hoped that the monasteries would also generate administrators and educators. Scores of new monasteries went up, and hundreds of churches were built or restored, richly decorated. Towers, and bell towers especially, grew taller--nesting places for angels and archangels who were expressly invited to alight and perch there to protect humans against lightning and sin, taller also because they were impressive and visible from afar and practical as watchtowers. Watchtowers were going to be needed soon because a lot of the new buildings were going to fall within a generation or two. Most of the great monastic foundations disappeared in the time of troubles that followed the death of Charlemagne.

One of these, the Abbey of Saint Riquier's was built in the 790s near Amiens in northwest France. It held three hundred monks, a school with one hundred students, one hundred ten knights with their own chapel, and a great host of servants to serve all these people. Charlemagne's special sympathy for scholars and clerks meant that he was always a favorite with them, and that was reflected in the documents of the time. But Charlemagne's rein was not based on intellectual pursuits or scholarship, it was based on war, on violence successfully exercised, as was the entire Carolingian dynasty of Frankish kings which ruled for two and a half centuries from the time of Charlemagne's father to the year 987. But when Carolingian civilization could no longer meet violence with superior violence, it floundered. Charlemagne wanted to be a Roman emperor in fact as well as name, but he died in 814 like a Frankish chief, dividing his lands among several legitimate sons. It could have been worse since he had hundreds of bastards. Charlemagne's successors were incompetent and divided. After 820 or so, Norsemen, Hungarians, and Saracens brought even worse horrors to Europe than had been suffered in the centuries before Charlemagne. Saracen is simply the Byzantine word for a Muslim Arab. Westerners borrowed it to describe the Muslim enemy that kept pushing north across the Adriatic, the Mediterranean, and the Pyrenees. The Saracens raided into the Alps and into central France. They even sacked Rome in 845, but that was becoming a tradition. Everyone who was anyone had to sack Rome.

Although the Hungarians never managed to get that far, they did spread terror throughout the rest of Europe. Hungarians were a Turkic people from the Eurasian Steppes, and they displaced the Huns from what is now Hungary. They ravaged to the walls of Constantinople, all over Germany and France, as far as Burgundy and the Rhone Valley, and well down into Italy. They were the scourge of Europe until defeated and converted in the second half of the tenth century. As a matter of fact, our word for the gigantic hungry ogre, whom a lot of fairy story heroes meet and defeat, derives from the word for Hungarian "Hungar" or "Hungre."

But the main threat to Western Christendom came from Scandinavian pirates and invaders, the Northmen also known as Norsemen or Normans. They were also called Vikings, perhaps after the narrow channel between Sweden and Denmark, the Vik. The Viking danger was not new. It had been stayed off since 800 or so by Carolingian diplomacy, busy missionary activity and of course arms. When the successors of Charlemagne started to fight each other, Viking attacks on their kingdoms became more serious. In 845, a Danish king destroyed Hamburg, which was at the time the northernmost outpost of Christian civilization. In the same year Paris was sacked, and the King of France, Charles the Bald, paid a heavy ransom to the Danes to get them out again until next time. But these disasters were only the prelude to the main Viking attack on the West which began around 850 and continued with-
out a stop for the next fifty years. During these years, it wasn't any longer a question of isolated pirate raids, but of skillfully planned invasion by highly organized professional armies that didn't just want plunder, but sought conquest and settlement. Year after year Norwegian and Danish Vikings launched campaigns against Germany, the Netherlands, England, France. They defeated what armies the kings could gather. They could take and sack almost any town or abbey in their way, and few places were safe from their swift, shallow draft ships and their heavy swords.

Swedish Vikings also penetrated the lands east of the Baltic, along the Dnieper and Volga Rivers, in the 800s. The name of the land we call Russia comes from the Finnish name for these Vikings, Rutzic or Rowers. They were going to melt into the Slav populations, but their expeditions provided an essential link between the West and The eastern Roman Empire, between the Baltic and the Black Sea and the Caucasus. In the West, however, Viking colonies were set up during the 900s throughout the Atlantic islands, in England, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland with some landfalls on the North American continent. Most important though, was the settlement in the lower valley of the Seine that would become a buffer state between French territories and other raiders. This became the Duchy of Normandy, and in due course, its rulers managed something the other Vikings never had--the conquest of England in 1066.

Still, for three hundred years, until Christian kingdoms were established in Scandinavia in the eleventh century, Viking destruction continued because this is what the Northmen did best: sail, fight, and rob. But the robbery was often part of a larger enterprise--trade. Like the Phoenicians or Greeks, the Vikings were merchants as well as pirates. Like the Assyrians, their pillaging raids and wars also redistributed debt. Indeed it's quite likely that their major role was to release wealth stored in Western treasuries and put it back into circulation. They stole from the monasteries, and they used the silver to buy land to settle on or to equip ships to trade with. And so the Vikings probably did a lot to reopen internal commerce in Europe and contributed to the beginning of economic revival from the doldrums that they themselves had helped create.

In the meantime, however, they destroyed a great deal and killed for the fun of killing. It's of these years that a chronicler of 884 wrote: "The Northmen cease not to slay and carry into captivity the Christian people, to destroy the churches, and to burn the towns. Everywhere there is nothing but dead bodies: clergy and laymen, nobles and common people, women and children. There is no road, there is no place where the ground is not covered with corpses. We live in distress and anguish before this spectacle of the destruction of the Christian people."

These terrible years also witnessed the final collapse of the Carolingian Empire, the failure of the last attempt of Charlemagne's successors to rally the united forces of the West around the surviving representatives of the House of Charles. This failure was followed by a new alignment of power. The new successful leaders were not the weak kings; they were local leaders who maintained a bit of order and who organized resistance against outside attacks. Erk, the Count of Paris, or Rollo and his descendants in Normandy, or Henry, the Duke of Saxony and his son Otto, who finally beat the Hungarians to a pulp--these new princes derived their authority from their military leadership and from their power to protect their country, and indeed a series of victories by the mid-900s would mark the turn of the tide. Much suffering was still in store for the West, but the worst of the horrors had passed and the survival of Christendom was secured as we shall see next time.

#119 The Middle Ages

In a lawless age people looked for immediate solutions to immediate problems; how to beat back the enemy, how to rebuild a working economy, how to stay alive--until out of anarchy a new social order was put together that would restructure Europe.

The Middle Ages this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

The Middle Ages were really invented by the Renaissance. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries people felt that they were coming out of a long period of darkness into a world that could compare itself with the ancient world at best, or could at least try. Since the dark dirty centuries they left behind didn't deserve to be dignified
with a special name they just called them the age-in-between. Now we now realize that this dark and dirty age was also innovative and that in its thousand years or so after the fall of the western Roman Empire Europe took on the shape and features that we know today.

The Middle Ages began in the fourth and fifth centuries with the encounter of two peoples and two societies; Germans and Romans. By this time when the Germans invaded the Roman Empire and overrun Gaul, Spain, England, Italy, Rome was nothing but a shabby stage set and the two societies weren’t all that different. Remember that since the third and fourth centuries, a demographic and economic slump had been wearing down the network of roads and cities that the legions set up to protect the Pax Romana, diminishing both the comfort and the culture of the urban minority, and then as the empire’s urban civilization cracked, the pre-Roman, pre-Colonial rural substructure reappeared. Clans and gangs gathered around great land owners, around village leaders or tribal chiefs who provided the keystone of social relations. Local lords living in great villas on their rural estates became the real power in the countryside. And the countryside became as it had been before the Roman conquest, the real base of the economy, in due course for several centuries it became the entire economy. This change was radical for the towns which we usually associate with civilization. But it was less noticeable in the countryside which had always lived by its own rhythm no matter who lived there. The barbarian tribes carried cultural baggage of their own, of course. They ate porridge and drank beer; they were more warlike, less disciplined, more inclined to individual freedom, and more abstract in their art forms than people of the western empire. These people ate bread, drank wine, used cash, and built with stone. But that didn’t stop the barbarian leaders from taking over some of their villas and some of their cities too, and from adopting the finery of a dying civilization.

At the core the two societies of invading barbarian and of natives, the two societies were pretty similar. Both were rural, both owned slaves, both were dominated by strong aristocracies of almost equal brutality; and just as the aristocracy of Gaul had become Gallo-Roman after the Roman conquest in the first century B.C., in the same way, a bit of Gallo-Roman civilization rubbed off on the German aristocracy in the fifth and sixth centuries and a lot of Germanic barbarism rubbed off on the Gallo-Romans. So there was some integration between the two groups especially at the top. But it was chiefly an integration downward towards the lowest common denominator.

The economy was primitive, what you might call an agro-military economy. Production was at the subsistence level and the only real source of profit was armed robbery and pillage. So the economic impetus provided by new inventions like the yoke, the heavy plow, and the crank resulted in better armed tribes better able to build new states. The Saxons in England, Lombards in Italy, Franks in Gaul; and of these states the most prestigious and the best known was the Carolingian Empire which Charlemagne brought to its apex. But what was the Carolingian Empire really? A clan of village chieftainship writ large with universal pretensions. This remarkable object is Charlemagne’s sarcophagus. In fact, throughout the Middle Ages talented and astute war leaders would increase their power by war then they would die leaving their whole house of cards to come crashing down because their heirs couldn’t hold it up. Even Charlemagne’s Empire fell apart this way. Every spring throughout Europe a king would call on his lords in their manors to follow him to war. That is, to join on plundering expeditions that went further and further afield. Most of the king’s revenues didn’t come from taxes. There were no tax collectors. Instead they came from robbing the subjects of other kings or robbing lords outside his realm and that’s how the lord’s revenues were raised too. The basic food and fuel of the kings and lords and everybody else on top—the knights, bishops, priests—came from the land, came from the peasants who worked the land. But that was just to live on. It didn’t pay for weapons or luxuries or spices. Those had to be financed by the successful exercise of violence.

This perfectly functional economy especially if you like hunting people and animals, turned on personal relations, on personal service, loyalty, obedience. It was all based on the exchange of gifts and services. I give you protection, you give me service. I give you service, you give me my keep. I give you land, you fight for me. It was a two way movement; up from the bottom the weak sought the protection of someone powerful; down from the top, the strong looked for men to work or fight for them. And it became increasingly obvious that of all the arrangements in which one man was subordinate to another, the highest, the most honorable was to serve with a sword and a lance and a horse. Such a servant, bound to his master by all sorts of solemn oaths, was a vassal or liege; and this relationship was the basis of the feudal system which developed and reigned all over Europe throughout the Middle Ages, and which did not really disappear in many parts of Europe until the nineteenth century.

In a period of chaos any man might be a fighter but not every man could be one. For one thing not everyone was cut out for it; for another, equipment was expensive. A helmet was as expensive as three oxen, and a horse was worth eighteen to twenty cows. Then again it took a long time to learn to handle a horse efficiently in combat and to fight in heavy armor; a Carolingian proverb says, "You can take a lad in his early teens and make a knight of him but later, never." By this time around the end of the eighth century the heavy cavalryman had come to be recog-
nized as king of the battlefield. The stirrup enabled him to charge infantry and bowl them over or to rise in the saddle and back away with a sword. The heavy armor protected him from infantry weapons. The horse enabled him to wear the armor and fight in it without being excessively tired. And the horseshoe allowed the horse to cover a lot of ground with this heavy man on its back even over rough terrain. It followed then that the cavalryman could swoop in suddenly, or he could get away swiftly, or he could hover around bodies of infantry that were too large to attack frontally and cut off their stragglers and ambush them when he chose to do so. All these advantages were realized by Charlemagne who increased the proportion of cavalry in what had been a foot slogging army. The value of cavalry would be emphasized further during the period of chaos when the Carolingian Empire fell to pieces in the ninth century under the raids of new barbarians.

More than ever, every man would be looking for a strong leader who could afford mounted men. Every leader would be looking for strong men who could fight on horseback. Only armed riders could beat back the Vikings, the Saracens, the Hungarians. But where were these expensive professionals to come from? Who was going to pay them? How were they going to be paid at a time when trade had decayed, currency was scarce or non-existent and the supply of food itself was chaotic? The answer was a set of relationships based on homage, one man belonging to another man, and on mutual protection. Eventually these relationships were going to be recognized as the fundamental structure of society in the shape of serfdom and vassalage and lordship. And they were also going to provide the solution to the economic and logistical problems of primitive and disorderly societies in Europe.

But it wasn't going to happen all at once. What we often call the Feudal System, for simplicity's sake, is a generalization that covers a variety of arrangements and oaths and rituals and formalities over a long period of time beginning in the sixth or seventh centuries and culminating six or seven hundred years later. These can range from a household of retainers, fed and clad, and perhaps mounted by the lord, to the lord, the sort of thing that you can find even before Charlemagne, through groups of dependents most visible in the ninth and tenth centuries, bound to the lord by a fief or benefice, a gift of cash, a loan, a piece of land, the revenue from a piece of land; and it could range to the classic knight, set up with a land grant which he holds at first precariously, that is, at the will of the lord in return for his services and that of his retainers, or else for his life time and which by the late eleventh century becomes hereditary family property. Now all of these different forms depend on what can be squeezed out of the producers, who are mostly peasants. And since they don't have much cash, we are talking of exactions in kind, provender, labor, transport, different services. By the tenth century, feudal protection rackets pretty much extinguished the remains of a free peasantry. The successful lord establishes his right to tax and tithe, his monopoly of hunting, his right over forests and commons. He forces the peasants to grind grain in his mill, to bake their bread in his oven, to get their fish for fast days from his pond; and above all, he imposes his justice, the right to judge and fine and punish; which means not just power but revenue. So what we call the Feudal System is not just one system, but many systems, an organized disorder designed to subsidize professional fighters by exploiting the non-professionals; and when I describe it, please bear in mind that I'm talking about an ideal model that was approximated only rather late in the day.

The vassal was quite simply another man's man. And the feudal relationship was that between the lord who had bestowed what we call a fief, and the man who had accepted it and who owes the lord his service in return. This fief could well be money or the right to levy tolls on a certain bridge or fort or mill. But most of the time it was land, because land above all meant men who lived on it and men meant power. In principle, the situation was quite simple; for instance lets say, you're the master of a great property; you can only defend it with men and arms. You may build a castle you may build a keep but even that has to be defended by specialists, by professional soldiers. You can only get these professionals by paying them. But how are you going to pay them? There is very little ready cash. Even the princes, the great barons, usually have to melt down the plate or hock the family jewels when they really need some cash. And even if you offer the men coins their would be no shops for them to spend them in. Nor can you afford to keep more than the limited number of men in your own castle, because there is just so much food in your stores; carting things about is difficult. Even kings and counts have to migrate from manor to manor in order to eat up what's available in each and then move on. So if you want to attach men to you have to give them land. Land with serfs on it who worked to provide the wherewithal for their new master's keep and for the equipment and in return for the land these men will fight for you.

In other words the land is a sort of wage and it's supposed to revert to you who gave it away when the wage earner has died or when he ceases to serve you. But in effect you don't mind accepting the same services from a son or even from a son-in-law and so over the generations what had started as a purely personal fief becomes hereditary. And the incumbent's begin to treat the land as a right even though it started as a kind of pay. Originally a new vassal had to give his lord a present when he took over his fief, a sort of key money. This gift was called the relief and it was important because it was going to modify the whole spirit of the system, because over the generations the lord
started to treat the fief he gave to his vassal less as a source of power than as a source of revenue. And the vassal
came to look on the fief increasingly as his own property for which the relief had been something like a down pay-
ment. He felt that he could use the property pretty much as he pleased, not just leaving it to his heirs but even sell-
ing it or giving it away, say, as part of a dowry, or of some other deal.

Eventually everything became very complicated, in principle you were supposed to be the man of one lord
only. In practice, however, you might be the man of several different lords, because you may have accumulated bits
of land through inheritance, or dowries, or exchanges to round out your holdings. And you would be in a quan-
dary if you lords fought each other, which was not unusual. So in due course, around the eleventh century, the old
homage in which a man puts his hands between those of the lord and kissed him on the lips, this became increasingly
symbolic. What really counted by the twelfth century were money fees which shows that cash was coming back into
its own; and then a hundred years later we get contracts which spelled out the obligations of the contracting parties.
And this was the beginning of the end. Remember that the Feudal System had been elaborated, to cope with the
problems of an economy where money was scarce, and broader social structures were fragile or nonexistent. It had
answered the problem by emphasizing personal relations from man to man and payment in-kind by an exchange of
services. But as the money economy gradually reestablished itself, as social order reappeared, the feudal arrange-
ments of a chaotic age gradually gave way, despite attempts to adapt to new conditions, they became increasingly
anachronistic.

Something did remain of the feudal relationship, however, and that was the importance of personal relations
and personal affections. And this intimate bond was so powerful that when the poets of southern France invented
the idea of courtly love in the twelfth century, they conceived the faith of the perfect lover on the model of the devo-
tion of a liege to his lord. The perfect lover was the perfect vassal. He swore allegiance to his lady on bended knee
and the same gesture with the hands joined together, which was the gesture of homage, became the gesture of pray-
er, which it had not been before. In other words you paid homage to God, the Lord above. Also living in the Feudal
System and writing all this down were the clerks and monks who were part of the system's power structure, and cruci-
cial to its culture. They interpreted what was going on, they recorded events according to that interpretation, and
they told the ruler what it was he was really doing as well as what he should be doing. This clerical enterprise had its
roots in the Jewish Old Testament--and this, for example, is the Coronation of David and it had its roots in the
Roman classics. It stressed that the ruler was appointed by God to carry out God's will on earth. And God's will was
the public good, in this case the practice of Christian virtues as determined by the Church and the application of
Roman law. The king's task, then, was to lead the people to Christian salvation and, like the Emperor Augustus, to
bring peace to the land, maintain order and protect the weak and the poor.

But this model invented by the clerics went against the reality of royal power. If you turn the king into a
prince of peace, you diminished his own revenues and you weaken his hold on the lords whose chief interest was
war and loot. If you made the king protect the weak and the poor, you offered him allies who could give no support
and you put him on the opposite side from the nobles whose revenues came from exploiting the weak and the poor.
The true masters in the Middle Ages were not the men of peace after all, but the men who knew how to fight and
who had the weapons and the horses to do it. They built their keeps, or better still their castles, for local defense
and this means their own defense. It has been said that peasants could take refuge in their lord's keep. But in the
typical keep their wasn't room for refugees for their cattle, for their wagons and so on. The peasants did indeed live
in terror of raids and pillage from outside. But when they had to look for refuge they looked for it in the hills, in
the woods. The lords furnished no refuge. They were simply in the protection racket. If a neighbor beat up their
peasants or robbed them, they beat up his peasants and robbed them. And it was this role as protector that per-
mitted the lords to appropriate an ever growing portion of the peasants' crops. So here we have three classes
taking shape, each with different interests and with different pleasures. The lords and their violent retainers, the
peasants and the clergy. We shall see how they work together and how they struggled against each other next time.

#120 The Feudal Order

The noble in his castle, the cleric in his church, the peasant in his hut, a simple social model that would last
for centuries. But the more successful it was in reestablishing order, the more it encouraged the very forces that
would sap it's strength.
And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time, we got a hint of what feudal society was like in the early Middle Ages with vassals pledging allegiance to their lords and fighting for them in return for a piece of the lords’ land and the peasants that went along with it. So, on the one hand, we had an aristocracy of lords and vassals who had property; and, on the other, the peasants, or serfs as they might be called, who provided all of the work and, in return, got temporary permission to stay alive. But, there was also a third class, the clergy, which was an integral part of the feudal power structure.

The Church had been doing well all this time. It had been given lands; it had been given treasure. And it could manage its wealth with greater continuity than secular landowners, who varied in quality and who were often away robbing some other lord. The Church never died, so the Church got even richer, and it led a new cultural revival around the year 1000. This is the era described by a monk in Burgundy named Raul Glarber, who didn’t think much of his times in general, but he tells us that the fabrics of churches were rebuilt, and every nation of Christendom rived with each other which should worship in the handsomest buildings. These churches Glarber talks about are in what we call the “Roman style” or “Romanesque.” Gothic was only invented a century later. But they are splendid enough and, while public building surged forward, so did public thought, or rather, clerical thought about public matters. And this produced a new social model much more realistic than the preceding one which you’ll recall had the king as a man of peace at the center of society protecting everybody else.

Although the clergy still saw the Christian ruler as important, now, he was part of a wider Christian society which was divided into three social categories, each with one particular function: the men who pray, the men who fight, the men who labor. In this model, the spiritual is superior to the temporal, and the sword is superior to the spade. One prays to save the soul, the other fights to save the bodies and the property of the community, and both deserve to be kept by the labor of others. So, below them are the peasants, working to feed them. It was a simple model, and it’s very simplicity kept it going for a long time.

The model also provided the justification for idleness, by making it appear honorable, and representing manual labor as dishonorable which, of course, it was when the model was forged. Those who could, prayed for or fought, those who couldn’t, labored. And so, production was a vulgar activity and the noble and holy were idle and unproductive. It has been argued that there was a contrary Christian tradition; after all, Christ was a carpenter. And at monastic rules, like the rule of St. Benedict required manual labor.

As the Latin saying goes, “Laborare est orare”, to work is to pray. But the fact is that the only reasons why monastic rules recommended work were first, to avoid boredom, during which the mind could wander in dangerous directions; and, second, to teach humility, precisely because labor was a humbling experience. At best, work was an encouragement to spiritual endeavor. Its task was to subsidize prayer and contemplation so they could proceed without material difficulties. Productivity was no concern of noble minds. And this is a notion that was going to leave its mark on Western society and culture.

Furthermore, the tripartite model of clergy, nobles and commoners which was intended to represent order, in fact, created friction, the bitterness and hostility born out of the power relations it depicted. Realizing the friction, the Church tried to reduce it by propagating the notion that the social order was based on cooperation and services mutually rendered. This painting entitled, “ Allegory of Good Government,” by the fourteenth century artist Lorenzetti, reflects the idea of cooperation and interdependence. The symbols of justice, peace, fortitude, prudence, common good, magnanimity, temperament, and charity, all rest upon a unified people below. And, here we have the “Allegory of Bad Government,” in which Lucifer stands center stage, and everyone else is bickering and selfish. In truth, some people were cooperating and serving more than others.

As western Europe ran out of barbarians and began to settle down, however relatively, marsh, forest, fallow, gave way to vineyards, and orchards, and fields. New villages sprang up to clear and work new lands, the volume of production continued to rise, and since this took place in a system which was very good at squeezing what it could from the laborers at the bottom of the heap, most of the new surplus was transferred into the master’s barns, and onto their tables.

This surplus stimulated the master’s taste for luxury, so, to satisfy this new demand, teams of specialists developed out from the indistinct peasant mass—masons, artisans, traders, and this revival of demand for services brought about in turn, a revival of the towns where the exchange of services took place. Urban centers had been
insignificant for several centuries, but in the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, the ancient cities revived, and new market towns sprang up at crossroads, at river crossings, at convenient stops along the highway. By the end of the twelfth century, Western civilization had, once more, gone through a fundamental change; it had been rural for nearly a thousand years. From now on, it was going to be dominated by urban centers. Everything was going to revolve around the towns—riches, power, and cultural creativity.

Now naturally, such a profound transformation had an impact on the model of the three orders, and on the social relations this model tried to stabilize. Within each order, material progress complicated the social hierarchy. In the Church, the urban revival emphasized the break between the rural monastic orders and monasteries, and on the other hand, the urban clergy that grew up around the new town cathedral. Among the aristocracy, the growing importance of the urban economy strengthened those lords who controlled the markets at the expense of those who lived in the country. But the greatest revolution took place not at the top, but in the third estate among the commoners. The lowest of the three orders had become increasingly multiple, increasingly diverse. Peasants continued to represent the immense majority, but, even at the rural level there was more mobility, and some peasants had become better off than others.

But the contrast was strongest in the towns with their artisans, journeymen, and small traders, and especially with the merchants who operated on a larger scale and who in some cases, had become merchant princes. Professional organizations were also developing, guilds and fraternities which defended the interests of a parish or a trade, and corporations of masters and students in the new schools that had been established. These schools started out first in Bologna and Paris, but they soon appeared in every large city working under charters granted by the pope, or the emperor, or the king. The word "university," is simply medieval usage for such independent corporations. But with all this change came more conflict. Typical of the struggle between the old order and the new forces was the agreement signed in 1215, between John, King of England, and his barons; an agreement that has come down to us as Magna Carta or the "Great Charter."

By the time John became king, royal administration had improved, but royal finances had not. So, John taxed the nobles, the clergy, and the cities. He encroached on their privileges, and by sending out his officers to tax, he brought the kingdom to the verge of civil war. The only way to avoid a conflict was by an agreement which spelled out the rights of free men, especially barons, of course, and of clergy, but also of towns and merchants.

This recognition of new interests was significant even though nobody took the charter very seriously at the time because feudal agreements were always breaking down. But out of its provisions, there grew basic legal rights for Englishmen, and also, a representative institution called "parliament," designed to see that the king kept his word and did not overrun his rights. So, this reactionary feudal document which was meant to protect the interests of the great, became the basis of ever more progressive institutions.

By this time in Europe, economic activity at all levels had loosened old restraints and weakened feudal bonds and clan loyalties. With prosperity, Europe became more adventurous, interested in material progress, believing that the world was created for man, and man was spiritually responsible for mastering it. The times suggested a new hope for personal success and spread the extraordinary idea of progress, the notion that things were actually getting better, that your only hope was no longer in Heaven alone but on earth as well. You could expect to better yourself if you worked hard, if you fought well, if you showed enterprise in business, or skill in managing your lord's affairs. A good indication of this new spirit—was that Europe now turned from a defensive posture to an offensive one. It embarked on the sort of imperialist adventure that is characteristic of societies that are bursting with energy, vitality, and self-confidence.

Between the eleventh and the thirteenth century, eight major expeditions went out to rescue Jerusalem and the holy places from the infidel Turk. The First Crusade, as these armed pilgrimages were called, captured Jerusalem in 1099, and the resulting Christian kingdom of Jerusalem lasted nearly one hundred years. By the thirteenth century, however, the original enthusiasm had run out. The Fourth Crusade in 1204, which was supposed to be directed against Egypt, wound up capturing Constantinople instead and set up a Latin kingdom there that lasted sixty years; but people were loosing interest. By the end of the thirteenth century, all crusaders' strongholds in Syria and Palestine had fallen, with Acre, the last in 1291.

Recapturing the Holy Land from the infidels was certainly a crucial factor inspiring the Crusades, but there were other interests at work. The most important was the determination to reduce the fighting and disorder in Europe by exporting them abroad. Or, if that wasn't possible, feudal high spirits could be turned to useful ends by directing them against Christian heretics at home. All heresies threatened the ideological monopoly of the
Church and therefore, had to be put down. And so, the first Christian heretics were burned at the stake soon after 1000 AD. In the thirteenth century, a crusade was launched against the Albigensians, or Cathars, the pure ones who lived in the Albi area of southwest France.

The Albigensians were a particularly serious threat because they considered God and Satan, good and evil, to be coequal in power. Everything material, the world and matter, was created by evil. This included political structures, the feudal system, and also the Church because it pretended that salvation was possible in this world. So, the Albigensians threatened everybody in power. They couldn't be tolerated, and they were put down without mercy. The crusaders of the Middle Ages did not discriminate. They killed Europeans as enthusiastically as they killed non-Europeans. As a matter of fact, after the siege of one Albigensian stronghold at Beziers when a soldier asked the bishop how to tell the good Catholics apart from heretics, the bishop was blunt, "Kill them all, God will recognize his own." But the most popular kind of crusade was the one fought to convert the foreign heathen, preferably not too far away. And if they didn't convert, to kill them and settle good Christians on their lands.

The reconquest of Spain from the Arabs was a profitable campaign that went on into the 1490s, and the expeditions that Spain and Portugal sent to North Africa and across the Atlantic to America were also crusades of sorts. So the crusading tradition and the colonial experience merged into one another, as did their inspirations: high spiritual aims and low material ones, the desire to get away from home, and the desire to get rid of troublesome enemies, vigor and enterprise and greed. But at the same time, people were trying to affirm themselves unconstrained by their elders and betters, and especially unconstrained by the Church.

In the twelfth century, a profane secular culture appeared emancipated from the Church, sometimes critical of it, and reflecting a new public of city people who wanted to enjoy their new prosperity, and of lords and ladies who wanted to enjoy each other. In Cologne, which was then the most important city in Germany, the city poet wrote a song whose first verse goes like this:

Down the primrose path I post,
Straight to Satan's grotto
Shunning virtue doing most
Things that I ought not to,
Little hope of Heaven I boast,
Charmed by pleasure's auto,
Since the soul is bound to roost,
Save the skin's my motto.

There must have been a lot of people who felt this way and who didn't mind saying what they thought, which tells you something about the changed spirit of the time. There were also new games of love, which may not have been serious, but which do suggest emancipation from the religious beliefs of more constricting times, and also gentler habits. A rediscovery of manners and gallantry, everything we describe as chivalry.

A good example of this is a well known romance of the time. Around the year 1200, somewhere in France, a troubadour, a traveling poet and singer, created the love story of Aucassin and Nicolette. Aucassin, the son of a count, loves and wants to marry Nicolette, who is a captive maid of no apparent station, just brought back from the Saracens. Aucassin is told that he must marry a girl of his station, the daughter of a king or of a count, and if he makes Nicolette his mistress, then he will never enter Paradise but go to Hell. And this is what he answers:

"What have I got to do in Paradise? I seek not to enter there, provided that I have Nicolette, my most sweet friend whom I love so much. For none go to Paradise except such people as I will tell you. Old priests go there, and old cripples, and those maimed wretches that grovel all day and all night before the altars, and those folk clad in old thread-bare cloaks and in old rags and tatters who are naked and barefoot and full of sores and die of hunger and thirst and cold and miseries; these go to Paradise; with them, I have nothing to do. But to Hell I will go, for to Hell go the fine clerks and the fine knights who have died in tournaments and grand wars, and the brave soldiers and the noble men; with those will I go. And there, too, go the fair and gracious ladies who have friends two or three beside their husbands; and there go the gold and the silver and all the fine furs. And there, too, go the minstrels and the poets and the kings of this world. With those will I go so that I have Nicolette, my most sweet friend with me."

You can see here, a reversal of all accepted value. As long as his father refuses to give him permission to marry, Aucassin refuses to fight in the war that threatens his father's estates and his own. And finally, father and son make a deal, and Aucassin fights and wins, only to find that his father breaks his word. No, he will not let him
see Nicolette after all. And so, Ancassina releases the enemy leader whom he has taken prisoner, and he charges his enemy to do with his father as much harm as possible. And so, you see, every accepted value—Christian, filial, feudal, trampled by this love-crazed lout. As for the young lovers' adventures, they go on and on. They lose each other, they find each other, they kiss, they marry, and they live happily ever after, which is as good a place as any to end. Next time, a look at everyday life in the Middle Ages, please join us then.

#121 Common Life in the Middle Ages

It was an uncomfortable world—hungry, cold, dangerous, where the Black Death reigned and undeserved masses dreamed of plenty. A young and nervous world dominated by sudden and irrational emotions, fear of the supernatural, and hope in it.

Common Life In The Middle Ages this time on the Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

If cats could write history, their history would be mostly about cats. Now human history is written by people who can read and write, and so it is mostly about people who can read and write, and about those who are important to them. In the Middle Ages, roughly between the sixth and the fourteenth centuries, that meant bishops and princes and anybody else who paid, or kept, or disciplined the men who wrote, who were mainly clerks and monks. And so we know more about that sort of person than we know about simple people partly because they are individually more important, but also because once we leave the thin upper crust of society, we enter the darkness.

Above the feudal order or rather disorder, there stood in most lands, a king, whose influence was gradually increasing and whose administration was expanding. After the eleventh century in England, Catalonia, and Castile; after the twelfth century in France, the royal machinery began to forge the judicial and administrative structure of enduring states. The king was anointed at his coronation, and he carried a divine power. He was identified with powerful patron saints. He was like a saint himself—a symbol of fertility, protector of the humble, a healer. Feudal society also invented a theology in its own image with a royal God ruling like a lord, enthroned in triumph or in judgment. Down below was Satan, image of the disloyal vassal, rebel, traitor. The political lesson was clear; even if the king was sometimes in trouble, the other side was bound to lose; the future lay with the king. He was crowned as master of a realm that could take weeks or even months to cross. He was the only lord who owed homage to no other beside the Lord God. All the great barons, the very greatest men in his kingdom, owed him allegiance. This meant that he was in a good position to increase his own domains when the line of succession failed, or when a vassal failed in his duties. He was the protector of churchmen. He was the protector of non-nobles. He could support them against bothersome nobles when it suited him, or he could support one noble against another.

There was also, however, the emperor, who had inherited the prestigious Roman title and the powerful memory of Charlemagne, depicted here at his coronation. But in fact, the emperor was merely the uncertain ruler of parts of Germany and Italy. He was often ignored by his own princes and by the increasingly powerful rulers of France and England and Spain. The idea of empire maintained the old ideal of universal unity under one supreme head. This is a banquet of the emperor Charles IV, given by the king of France, Charles V. But the reality was disunity, and disunity was most acute in the emperor's own realm. His hold on Germany was contested by civil war. His title was controlled by the princes who elected him, and who might depose him. His power was really based on his own family domains.

The emperor was in effect the head of a confederation of German princes. By the fourteenth century, this was reflected in the new title of the domain he ruled, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. But medieval Christendom was like one of the stone monsters that adorned its buildings; it had two heads, not one. The secular ruler was one, the pope was the other. And since two heads are seldom better than one, each tried to establish his own supremacy. The ensuing conflict kept them busy for several hundred years.

Emperors and kings claimed that the consecration of their coronation rights gave their office a sacred, religious character which entitled them to rule priests as well as laymen, to invest bishops, and to draw revenues from the Church. The popes, on the other hand, asserted that the spiritual realm transcended and ruled any worldly political power. Clerical propaganda compared the pope to the sun, emperors and kings to subordinate moons shining only with reflected light. In the end, though, the issue was very practical—who was going to be boss. The pope quarreled with the emperor about who was entitled to name bishops, who were both high dignitaries of the Church and
great feudal nobles with large estates. The pope also quarreled with the kings of France about their right to tax the clergy. This long struggle between Church and Crown finally came to an end when a King of France, Philip the Fair, checked Papal pretension and humbled Pope Boniface VIII. When the pope tried to prevent Philip from taxing the French clergy, Philip sent armed men to capture him in 1303. The ordeal was too much for Boniface, and he died a few months later. After that, the successors of Boniface took refuge in exile here in Avignon, that an imperial city they owned on the French border. This is the Papal palace at Avignon where the popes remained until 1378, some even later than that, reluctant proteges of the kings of France. Papal glory and influence were going to be restored later, but Papal pretensions to supremacy would never recover from this "Babylonian Captivity" as it was described. The priests kept their sacramental powers, but secular supremacy, from now on, stayed firmly in the hands of kings and princes.

It is important to remember, though, that behind this great struggle, beyond the tug for power, Church and Crown continued to collaborate throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Men of prayer and men of war continued to support each other against the Third Estate, the common men of labor. A thousand years before, Christ had advised his followers that Caesar should get his due, and now the representatives of Christ were needed to repeat the point again and again to keep people obeying laws, paying taxes, knowing their place. The priests seldom failed to remind them.

Beyond the churches, however, beyond the palaces, there was another far more basic world; for one thing, the vast majority of medieval people lived much closer to nature, and nature was wilderness. It was fallow-land, moors, brush, it was marsh where you could lose yourself and die. It was forest terrifying in its vastness and its dangers. In those days bears, boars, stags, especially wolves, wandered everywhere, into the fields, and into the town, even into Paris in the fifteenth century. Hunting wasn't just a sport but a necessary defense and, of course, absolutely necessary to provide meat. People went out to gather wild fruit, herbs, honey, just as they had done in the Stone Age. But most of their diet, even in the upper classes, was cereals, grains, which depended on uncertain harvests. So life was marked by famines which killed off as much as ten percent of a community. "Give us this day our daily bread," was a very real and anxious prayer.

A world of frequent shortages and uneven diet provided vivid fantasies of plenty, like the mythical "Land of Cockaigne" where every one was plump, where there were houses built of cake or barley sugar and streets paved with pastry; and sausages and roast larks fell from the sky. For centuries, food remained the foremost image of luxury; and where the poor dreamt, the rich and powerful ate, mostly overate. They often had stomach or liver troubles, or gout, or else they had tremendous vitality and needed a lot of violent exercise to work off their meals. Some of the underfed masses, on the other hand, were given to hallucinations, perhaps from hunger, or food poisoning, or too desperate appeals to magic to help them handle a world they couldn't cope with. Their masters were not immune to these fears either, in spite of being more comfortable. "Comfort," after all is a highly relative term.

And the nights were darker and the cold was colder than we can imagine, because there was practically no artificial light, and the heating facilities were rare and inefficient. And even light remained a luxury in huts where the only opening was often the door, and even in houses and palaces where openings were kept small for security reasons; and only the richest people could afford small panes of glass. So homes were cold and damp and dark and smelly, and often more uncomfortable than the fresh air outside. People kept warm by putting on more garments, piling one lot on top of another, and often they wore more indoors than they did outside. Altogether, they managed only a very unstable balance in the struggle against cold and damp and hunger.

A Medieval poem about Piers Plowman gives us a taste of what it must have been like. "The needy are our neighbors" says the poem, "if we are right, as prisoners in cells or poor folk in hovels charged with children and overcharged by landlords. What they may spare in spinning they spent on rental, on milk, or on meal to make porridge to still the sobbing of the children at meal time." Piers Plowman was written in the late fourteenth century after the great plague had devastated the West and it's worth remembering that things were rather less gray and grim in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when economic conditions had been better; and in many parts of Europe, population density had been almost as great as it would be in the eighteenth century, but basic material conditions remained pretty lousy throughout. It's not surprising, then, that the people of Middle Ages tended to die young. As many as half the babies born might die before one year, and women died in childbirth all the time.

In the fifteenth century, the life expectancy of aristocrats, in many places, was around twenty-one. Indeed the youth of many Medieval figures is one of the most striking things about them. Young people of the time had characteristically adolescent reactions; they may have been hardened warriors, but they easily burst into tears. They were easily excited, easily depressed, often naive, vain, enthusiastic, credulous; and in fact that's the way most people
seemed to be. Contributing to the general insecurity were the epidemics that struck over and over: smallpox, dysentery, all kinds of respiratory diseases. And there was also malaria which was endemic in a lot of areas. There were skin diseases, the worst of which was leprosy, which may have affected as much as five percent of the population in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Above all, there were the great plagues, the greatest in the 1340s and the 1370s. The Black Death, which killed one-third of the population of the West and half the population of many cities. If you add to these horrors, the commonplace violence of everyday life, you get people who were generally rough and rude and anxious, living a perpetually precarious existence. Now obviously, if people are uncomfortable, unwell, feverish, overfed if they are rich, underfed if they are poor, they are bound to fly off the handle or to collapse all of a sudden, which is what medieval people seemed prone to do. They were also extraordinarily sensitive to the supernatural, which may have had something to do with their frazzled nerves. Everybody seemed ready to believe in signs, dreams, portents, visions. In monastic circles, particularly, fasts and repressions were added to a regimen of discipline and reflection that was deliberately focused on one’s inner world and on the world of angels and demons. No psychoanalyst ever scrutinized his dreams with more loving care than the monks of the Middle Ages. But laymen also had their share of dreams and visions in this very emotional society where there was as yet no code of manners to prohibit fits or faints or swoons; and devils or saints were constantly intervening in every day affairs.

So this is an inexact and arbitrary society, a society dominated by sudden and irrational emotions in which a man says he’ll do something; and then he has a dream, he has a vision, or he says he has one, and he changes his mind. Or he puts it off, which is more easily done and more easily accepted, not only because people think that they’re at the mercy of mysterious forces, so that any excuse is good, but also because time itself is a vague and indifferent concept. In fact, if you want to measure the gulf between the Middle Ages and today, just try to imagine a world with almost no clocks.

For most people the measurement of time so essential in our world was impossible and often irrelevant. There were sand clocks; this one measured half-hours, but really they were quite inaccurate. There were sundials, but there wasn’t always sun. Most people were like the peasants who begged their bishops for a miracle because the village cock had stopped crowing and they had no other way of telling the time. As for matters beyond this everyday level like chronology and dates even for important things like the birthday of great nobles or charters or treaties, there was complete confusion.

In Papal documents, the year began at Christmas, but in Venice, it was the first of March. In Florence, it was the twenty-fifth of March, and in France it was at Easter. No wonder it took a major inquiry in 1284 to establish the age of the countess of Champagne, one of the greatest heiresses of the time. By then, however, one of the great intellectual developments of history was taking place. The calendar was being rationalized. The day was divided into equal hours, and mechanical devices were envisaged to keep tracked of it all.

In the fourteenth century, weight-driven mechanical clocks appeared with automatic figures to enhance them. By 1354, a cock crowed and flapped his wings over the great clock at Strasbourg. So from now on there was secular, rational, urban time born in the towns like Rouen under the influence of businessmen who knew the value of time because they had to keep accounts, plan trips, calculate interest. Yet this sort of thing remained rare because numbers were little known and awkwardly handled. Calculating things was a mystery reserved for specialists, and a lot of people continued to used a variety of measures that differed from place to place. Even those people you would expect to know their numbers, didn’t. Few architects or engineers were terribly exact about their calculations, which meant that a lot for buildings didn’t come out quite right or collapsed like this thirteenth century abbey. And it also meant that budgets, tax roles, financial plans were based on misinformation and self delusion.

You might say that this is so today, but not to the same degree as it was in fourteenth century England, where the royal council set out to levy a tax on English parishes. The council calculated that there were 45,000 parishes in the kingdom when all it had to do was to look at its own register to find there were only 8,600 parishes, an error of five to one. Now, in the Middle Ages, numbers were more likely to be used symbolically as when people talked about armies of 100,000 or 200,000, or when they talked about tens of thousands slain in battle, when armies seldom mustered more than 15,000 or 20,000 at most. Numbers were often used to impress, as when city officials, quite accustomed to complex bookkeeping, claimed populations in the hundreds of thousands for cities of thirty or forty thousand. In fact, the whole idea of exactness with its respect for figures was foreign to the medieval mind, which may have been just as well, since this was a very approximate world in which the best way to survive was to live from day to day. And yet at the same time, this rough and limited world and its often limited an awkward minds were also responsible for a wonderful series of artistic creations—creations that remained the most enduring glory of the three hundred years between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries as we shall see next time.
Cathedrals on a gigantic scale, towers that rose above the medieval landscape, new opportunities, new markets. As the urban centers of Europe recaptured an importance lost for centuries, they challenged the feudal order itself.

Cities and Cathedrals this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time we talked a bit about what was wrong with the Middle Ages, at least for the average European. It was a time of fear and discomfort at best, painful death at worst. Malnourishment and disease were endemic, superstition was ripe, and yet the hard realities of daily life could not extinguish an extraordinary artistic impulse. This rough world, these awkward minds, produced creations that still inspire awe many centuries later.

When one talks about medieval art, one thinks of the cathedral. Because the culture of the Middle Ages turned around this religious edifice, which was the expression of the most material aspirations as well as the most spiritual impulses. In a period of three centuries from 1050 to 1350, France alone extracted several million tons of stone in order to build eighty cathedrals, five hundred great churches, tens of thousands of parish churches. The French quarried and carried more stones in these three centuries than ancient Egypt in any period of its history, even though the great Pyramid by itself has a volume of two and a half million cubic meters.

The foundations of the great cathedrals go as far as forty or fifty feet down, which is the average level of a subway station; and in certain cases these foundations form a mass of stone as great as that of the visible building above the ground. By the year 1400, there was one church for every two hundred men, women, and children in Christendom, and the surface covered by religious buildings took up a great part of every city--here is Norwich cathedral. In places like Norwich, Lincoln, York, which had twenty thousand inhabitants between them, there were a hundred and forty churches. There might have been more and bigger churches yet, except that it would have meant demolishing one or two neighboring churches and also building new lodgings for the people whose houses had been torn down, which tended to act as a break on this building mania. Even so, the cathedral of Amiens, which covered about eight thousand five hundred square yards, allowed the entire population of the city, about ten thousand, to attend the same service.

For a comparison on our own scale you'll have to imagine a modern city building in its very center, a sports stadium that could accommodate a million people. The same gigantic scale appears in the height of the walls, the towers, and the spires. This is the cathedral of Beauvais, France; you could build a fourteen story building inside the choir without reaching the roof, which is about a hundred and fifty-seven feet high. In the twelfth century, the men of Chartres built a spire three hundred and forty-five feet high. Thank God no one has yet built a thirty story building there to equal it. And no one has put up a forty story skyscraper in Strasbourg that could match the four hundred and sixty-six foot spire of the cathedral there. Here was a powerful form of self expression, and one which literally dominated a good deal of life, towering over the squat, crowded cities and visible for miles and miles around. So that even today, you see the towers of the cathedral when you're still half an hours drive away from Chartres.

Clearly the spirit that planned and built these extraordinary enterprises was not all together primitive. It was inspired by a religious faith and religious awe that was determined to build temples to the Christian God more splendid than the heathens had ever conceived. Style and scale may have been affected by what was going on in Syria, or in Spain, in Arab architecture of which merchants and pilgrims were bringing back word. But it was also inspired by fierce local patriotism and pride and by a very modern emotion, competitiveness. Every abbey and community and city wanted a bigger and better and brighter church than everybody else. It would be the most conspicuous possible mark of their piety, but also of their means and success. All who could afford it brought in architects and masons who could give them the Empire State Building of Christendom.

Again and again these towers and walls were thrust up to the sky, to the glory of God and the envy of the neighbors in the next town. Again and again they collapsed only to be put up again. City raced city, and abbey raced abbey. In 1163, Notre Dame of Paris has the highest roof or nave--at a hundred and three feet. In 1194, Chartres built up to one hundred and eight feet. In 1212, Reims reached one hundred and thirteen feet, and nine years later Amiens bested that with one hundred and twenty-eight. Finally, in 1225, Beauvais topped them all with one hundred and fifty-seven feet, only to have the whole thing crash down half a century later. Fortunately, by then the architect was dead. But think how the builders of the cathedral tower of Pisa must have felt as it went askew, before they
could know that it would become a tourist attraction. Think also of the amount of capital in labor and resources that went into these structures. Scholars have argued that cities like Beavais which was very prosperous in the thirteenth century, declined thereafter in part because of such gargantuan endeavors, while the rich Italian cities built cathedrals far more modest, relatively, than those up in the north, and invested their wealth more profitably.

So this is another side of Medieval character, the wild sprees of enterprise and rivalry that remind us of nineteenth century America, when confidence and drive and the desire to show off were tearing things down and building others up. At the same time, these creations were going to serve as a language, a form of expression for the highest kinds of religious sensibility, of civic pride, of personal creativity, in an era when Western man was still very much tongue-tied. You can see it all in the extraordinary elevation and sweep of arches—and columns, in the grotesque caricatures that decorate stalls and capitals. In the impressive sculptures and murals that illustrate familiar stories from the Bible, like this flight to Egypt, or this temptation of Eve, and in the blending of sacred and profane that you find in the naive advertising of stained glass windows which all the local trades guilds sponsor. We might even see medieval art as a refuge for certain values that could not find expression anywhere else but in these privileged places. The moderation, the balance so singularly lacking in these times can sometimes be found in the Romanesque architecture, for example.

The exactness, the precision, the clarity that neither laws nor writing normally attained in medieval times can be found presiding over the work of the great master masons, of the vast Romanesque arches and domes and vaults. And the elevation, the grace, the purity so often lacking in the ordinary life of that vulgar, brutal age are expressed in the soaring pinnacles and towers of the great Gothic cathedrals of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the Gothic arch managed to cope with extraordinary structural problems of tension and balance. And yet how the cathedrals rose is not nearly as important as where they rose--in the towns. The revival of the town life was the Middle Ages' great contribution to our civilization. When you look at a medieval townscape you see the cathedral, but you also see other soaring structures that compete with it. The towers that noble clans built to maintain the feuds of the old system, as between the Montagues and Capulets of Romeo and Juliet; towers that turned a lot of places into miniature Manhattan's. Significantly, most of these towers have disappeared. At Florence, where there were as many as four hundred, only a few stubs are left. At Bologna, where there used to be nearly two hundred, only two survive. And tourists still drive to S. Miniato, a little town of four thousand people in the hills near Sienna, to see the towers that rise above it. There used to be seventy of them, now there are thirteen. The biggest tower in Sienna belongs to the town hall. And this is fitting because it was the town halls and the trade exchanges all over Europe that were going to supplant the cathedrals in importance, just as the modern world was going to win out over feudalism. If the First World War hadn't blown it up, you could still see the great clothing hall at Ypres in Belgium. Four hundred and thirty-three feet long, bigger than most cathedrals and just as splendid. The clothing hall was started in 1200, by the Count of Flanders, and this tells you two things: one, that some lords knew where their interests lay, and two, that the greatest profits from now on would come less from robbery and violence, and more from trade. Especially from the textile trade, on which the prosperity of many cities was founded in England, Flanders, the Low Countries, Italy and France. Trade in the Middle Ages meant exchange. Exchanging one product or commodity for another, and it involved a great deal of travel.

In late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the fairs of Champagne in northeast France became the main European exchange centers because the counts of Champagne had the good sense to improve roads, build market halls, set up special courts to enforce deals and contracts made at the fairs, and to keep the peace, at least as long as the fairs lasted—a week or two, six times a year. There were lots of things to ship and exchange, from wine to slaves, from spices to the pickled herring that made the fortunes of the Baltic, and of Dutch north seaports. At Danzig, for example, corn and timber coming down the Vistula River on the way to England or the Low countries was transferred from barges to seagoing ships. At Lubeck, it was transferred back to land transport to go as far as Hamburg on the Elbe then back to the ships again. But the greatest centers developed at the two ends of the most obvious trade route in Europe, in Flanders around Ghent and Bruges, where English wool was shipped to the continent and turned into cloth, and in Italy centrally located for the Mediterranean trade.

When we talk about the revival of trade and cities, we've got to keep a sense of proportion. By modern standards, everything was on a very small scale. There wouldn't be a European city to match Constantinople until the eighteenth century. Bruges had a population around thirty-five thousand; Milan and Venice, the two bigger cities in Europe, had four or to five times that many, at most, Florence, which may have had a hundred thousand at its peak, before the Black Death halved the population in the fourteenth century. Florence produced eighty thousand pieces of cloth a year. That's a lot less than the turn over of a single warehouse in Manchester, in England in 1850.
In the fifteenth century all the forges of Styria in Austria, which was then the iron making center of Europe, produced something like two thousand tons a year. One steel mill today turns out that much in a single day. The great Florentine banks, with branches all over Europe, ran on a staff between fifty and a hundred people. And the ships of the time were mere cockleshells. In 1492, the three caravels of Columbus put together had the capacity of five hundred and twenty tons, which is less than one-hundredth the tonnage of the Queen Elizabeth II. And yet the activity all this represented was on a new and invigorating scale, and the men who made the activity were a new breed, with horizons and ambitions that recalled the great days of the ancient world. Their scope was vastly enlarged by the crusades, which opened new opportunities and new markets, and which provided the loot that reversed the world's cash flow, which had been running from west to east, but which now turned around towards Europe. And the crusades also taught the nobility more sophisticated tastes, and new possibilities of consumption, another stimulus for expansion and trade. The merchants in their cities also benefited from the struggle between pope and emperor, which enabled most cities to escape the control of either. For the most part however, merchants were not very interested in feudal politics. They preferred peace to war and order to disorder because peace and order are good for business. What they were interested in, as one of them said in a letter, was "God and profit," although I can't help suspecting that profit came first. But there was also the excitement of adventure, enterprise, competition that spurred them on. Take a thirteenth century Genoese merchant like Benedetto Zaccharia. He owned dye works in Genoa, alum mines in Asia Minor, plantations on the Greek Island of Chios. He controlled ports and trading stations in Crimea, Syria, and southern Spain. He traded in spices and cutlery, which meant knives, since the fork only appeared at the end of the Middle Ages and then only for the very sophisticated. Zaccharia also traded in cloth and furs and salt and grain and potash.

It was men like Zaccharia who developed new business methods; techniques for raising capital and shifting it around, bills of exchange which were written orders directing that a specified sum be paid to a specified person, and which could themselves be exchanged to a third, or a fourth, or a fifth party. And there were places called exchanges, where goods could be bought and sold on paper without being seen; and double entry book-keeping to keep track of business; and new associations called companies, in which you could buy shares to spread the risk; and insurance to spread the risk still further. There was always risk of course, and often it was personal as well as financial, especially for the small traders who traveled alone, from one foreign place to another. Remember that "foreign" in the medieval world, could well mean any place five or ten miles from home.

Here is the advice a thirteenth century Norwegian merchant gave to his son: "The man who is to be a trader will have to brave many perils, sometimes at sea, sometimes in heathen lands, but nearly always among alien peoples. And it must be his constant purpose to act discreetly, wherever he happens to be. If you come to a place where the king or some other chief who is in authority has his officials, try to win their friendship. And if they demand any necessary fees on the ruler's behalf, be prompt to render all such payments, lest by holding too tightly to little things you lose the greater. Also, put a good price on your wares though not too high, and yet very near what you see can be obtained. Then you cannot be called a foist." So now, while these merchants were helping to change the economic structure of Europe, they were also beginning to change the social structures. The word "company," for example, which comes from the old practice of breaking bread together, had an aristocratic connotation. Alexander the Great had companions. So had Charlemagne. When the word was adapted to business ends, it suggested the new men's aspiration to nobility. And some of them lived like princes and exerted great power like Jacques Coeur, who was the financier and adviser of the French king in the middle 1400's, and whose palace in Bruges remains a monument of Gothic art. These were the people who invented modern banking, which was named after the "Banci," the benches or stalls that merchants and money changers used in the market place. Like Zaccharia or Jacques Coeur, the first bankers traded in every kind of luxury and necessity, on the general principle that diversity of investments spread the risk. Soon they progressed far enough to help finance crusades, to lend money to kings and be ruined when they failed to pay back their loans, to take over the finances of the Papacy, and finally to move from financing popes and kings to producing them. The Medici family of Florence produced four popes and two French queens in the sixteenth century alone.

But families and individuals had risen in the world in all societies, and in all ages. More important were the notions they involve, of investing in something else than salvation and the afterlife. Of enterprise, in something else than robbery and buying. Of the importance of literacy and accuracy. Quite simply, what we now tend to disparage as bourgeois values: hard work, thrift, honesty, responsibility, all of which may be a bit of a bore, but which were a vast improvement over the bloody anarchy that had gone before. Next time, we shall look at how these economic and political changes began to transform Europe in the late Middle Ages. Please join us then.
#123 The Late Middle Ages

It was a time of war and civil war, revolts in the towns, heresies within the Church. A time full of bitter conflicts at home and abroad, when men began to take their fate into their own hands.

The Late Middle Ages this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

We are now in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, better known as the late Middle Ages. It's a time of change, of new economies, new powers, and the shaping of a new kind of state. On the other hand, it's also full of the same old horrors: endless wars, grinding poverty, deadly plagues. You can call it a time of transition, but all times are times of transition. You can say it is increasingly dynamic, but you would not want to live there.

Peasants still accounted for eighty to ninety percent of the population and they would continue to do so into the nineteenth century. Nobles and clergy were still rich and powerful and they would continue to be so for a long time. But trade and the rise of the town had brought basic changes to Europe. Burghers, merchants, city folk in general had introduced the novelties of money, economy, capital, investments; the notions of time and profit and wage labor; and new social divisions; and new social tensions came with them. The old society of feudal orders, presumably willed by God, was breaking down. Worse, it was tearing itself apart in wars and civil strife. For example, the long struggle for supremacy between Italian popes and German emperors was weakening the emperors, who wasted their energy in foreign conflict when they should have been tending to troubles at home. Words like "German" and "Germany" are simply shorthand. The reality was two hundred and forty states, hundreds of semi-independent feudal lords, dozens of tough, active towns from the Baltic to the North Sea and along the Rhine and the Danube valleys, as well as the territories of the House of Hapsburg in Bohemia and Austria. And few of them got along.

In the fourteenth century, the spotlight turns to France. Here was yet another devastating conflict, the Hundred Years' War, which lasted even longer than its name—from 1337 to 1453 with very few interruptions. The war was a struggle of succession to the French crown, and it was waged between English and French contenders but also between factions supporting great feudal clans all over France, but especially in Burgundy and Flanders. When the English were finally driven out of France, the country was in ruins. Wolves roamed abandoned villages, orchards and fields. And worse than wolves were the bands of mercenaries that scoured the countryside for scarce provisions. Until lands returned to forests, scrub, or marsh by the end of the war i.e., mid-fifteenth century, the French population was one-third to one-half what it had been one hundred and fifty years before. But it wasn't all the fault of the English. For two score years after 1348, the Black Death killed off more people than any fighting could have, as much as half the population in certain places. The figure in the center of this French mural represents death by plague, not war. It's a chilling fact that the number of French homes in 1789 was only ten percent greater than it had been in 1328.

What was equally bad, the cost of war ate up resources that could have been put to productive use. If you forge swords, you cannot forge plowshares. If you build castles and fortifications, you can't build mills or bridges or roads; or rebuild the ones that are being destroyed. And it's not just material goods that are being destroyed. As the fighting drags on, the feudal order itself begins to crack. Feudalism, in the first place, was about military service. But short service feudal levies were not much use in an endless war. And so armies became more permanent and more professional. The more specialized the soldiers and their armament (and, incidentally, this is the time when artillery appears), the more money you need for them, the more the crown pressed to introduce taxes; which also strained the fabric of society because they are not part of any feudal contract, which is about an exchange of goods and services.

Monarchies like those in England and France survived this time of troubles by learning to manipulate their aristocracies and, as far as possible, to enlist them in their service. New taxes, which only commoners paid, provided funding for royal patronage that attracted nobles and won them over to the interest of the crown. Of course, taxes also strained the economy further. In the midst of misery and conflict, the conspicuous consumption of the great grew ever more conspicuous. There were costly and vivid garments. There were women's hats so tall that, in 1418, the doors of the royal castle in France had to be heightened to allow the queen and her ladies to pass, and this during the worst of the fighting. In spite of such folly, the French managed to drive out the English by 1453, except for one last English outpost at Calais. But this great victory for France was overshadowed that very year by an even greater defeat for the tail-end of an empire, Byzantium. At dusk on May 29, 1453, the people of Constantinople
made for the walls of the city, crying to the Virgin Mary for aid. Besieged for fifty days by 160,000 Turks, they didn't have enough men left to man the long walls and to mend the breeches made by a hundred and thirty cannon and a fleet of two hundred and fifty ships. One hour after midnight, the Turkish assault began. By noon of May 30, Byzantium was dead after more than one thousand years. In the West, however, its fall had already been discounted. Europe had other fish to fry. The English were busy in the last half of the fifteenth century with a civil war of their own. Another war of succession, it was poetically called the War of the Roses because the emblems of the two parties fighting for the crown were a white rose, for the House of York, and a red rose for the House of Lancaster. It's a long, dreary tale of murder, slaughter, battles, betrayals ending in 1485 when the last surviving claimant of the Lancaster line, Henry Tudor, won the Battle of Bosworth and became Henry VII. The only good thing about the war, whose only relationship to roses were the thorns, was that the belligerent aristocracy was nearly decimated. One-fifth of the land in England was left without a master, and Henry VII reclaimed it as royal domain, which increased the power of the crown at the expense of the feudal lords.

Finally, by the end of the fifteenth century, Europe began to recover from nearly two hundred years of war and plague. Devastated lands were restored, new lands were brought under cultivation, and the cities flourished once again: small ones, like Basel, with 8,000 to 9,000 people; middling ones, like Nuremberg, with 25,000; great ones, like Cologne and Bruges, around 50,000, Ghent. And, in Italy, the giants: Milan, Florence, Venice, with between 75,000 and 100,000 people each.

What the wars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had started by killing off the nobility and strengthening the kings--these cities were going to continue. Because now a new dynamic social group made its appearance that was profoundly anti-feudal, the middle class. Towns and cities had declined as economy and security declined in the fourteenth century. In the sixteenth century, they make a comeback and newly prosperous townsmen start to assert themselves. In Italy and Germany, where central government was weak or non-existent, they set up what become virtual city-states. In England, and, to a lesser degree, France, they become the allies of the crown against the feudal aristocracies. Urban elites don't just make money, they move into positions of power by going into royal administration where they can manipulate patronage. Furthermore, as they increase in numbers, as trade and the money economy grow, the life of the countryside was affected as well. Urban demands for food and raw materials made it possible for country folk to farm for profit above mere subsistence. Rising prices and the more plentiful supply of money also gave the peasant the means to buy his freedom or to commute his neighbor's services for a money rent or to take off for the cities, where, as the saying went, city air makes free.

Many things that happened in this period and beyond, including the Renaissance and the Reformation, were symptoms of the development of the urban middle class. It was in the 1300s and 1400s that ordinary families were endowed with surnames, which afforded them a new kind of personality. It was also in this period that more men of low birth began to win recognition and power. The best example of this is the great Italian war leaders of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Condottieri. This is Francisco Sforza, whose family ruled Milan. His father was a farmer. Sir John Hawkwood was the son of a tanner. He became Captain-General of Florence. He married the daughter of a duke. Erasmo Gattamelata and Bartolommeo Colleoni were commoners who became generals of Venice. Statues of this sort had, until then, been reserved for Roman emperors but now commoners could aspire to the honor of kings. Even more significant were the rich burghers who began competing with feudal lords for rank and title. This is Dick Whittington, who made a fortune and became Sir Richard Whittington, Lord Mayor of London. From that time on, knighthoods in England could be won in the county. And after 1500, by Tudor time, all the great ministers, like Thomas Cromwell, William Cecil, and their descendants, sprang from the new middle classes, not from the Feudal nobility.

The point here is not that new men came to the fore, because new men are always coming to the fore and everything is full of newly rich or newly noble people who bring in vulgarity, and dynamism, and good strong teeth and sharp elbows. The point is the way in which these new men came to the fore, the class they represented, and the values for which they stood; because now, instead of making your fortune by the horse and the sword, you made it by gold, and credit, and trading enterprise.

And it was no longer the knight who wandered the country, but increasingly the laborer, the apprentice in search of work now that the feudal order had broken down. And with labor increasingly mobile, employers found the cheap hands with which the great capitalist fortunes of the fifteenth century were put together. Financial speculation also came into vogue. We read of a dealer in the fourteenth century who spread a false rumor of war in order to send down the price of wool. And there were endless complaints about engaging, buying up a whole stock in order to get a monopoly. The respectable grocers of today are the descendants of those engrossers. Men also began to speculate in real estate, which hadn't been done since the fall of Rome, and to accumulate farms and to substitute
large-scale farming for piecemeal agriculture. Where sheep farming was more profitable than food growing, they would put the land to grass, where acres and acres of grazing could be looked after by a few men and a dog. The tenants were then thrown off the land to increase the great and growing army of potential workers, soldiers, vagrants, and criminals.

So, as the saying went, "sheep ate men, instead of the other way around." Or, more to the point, men ate each other more voraciously and more ruthlessly than they ever did before. In these processes, we can recognize both the appearance of something like a capitalist economy and a passing away of the Middle Ages. The important thing about this change was not whether it was for the better or for the worse, but that it was change. And that it brought into question an immemorial feudal order which people had not thought to question before. Evils that were accepted before were now resented. And resentments that were silent became vocal.

In a world where personal fate was no longer graven in stone, the poor were now held responsible for their poverty. And the poor, in turn, held others responsible and so Europe entered the age of social conflict. The fourteenth century especially was full of rebellion: workers against employers, small business against big business, peasants against lords, everybody against taxes and tax collectors. The most serious revolts were in the towns, because that was where you found the critical mass ready for anything. And it was also where social revolt acquired ideological overtones and turned into heresy against the established teachings of the Medieval Church. The rebellion was bad enough, but heresy was worse. Unfortunately, the right to expression in Europe was recognized less often than the right to repression. So heresy was often fatal for the heretics, especially when it took the form of a revolt of the poor against authority. To cope with heresy, as well as with poverty, the Church responded by founding new monastic orders, notably the Franciscans, who took the side of the poor, and the Dominicans, who very quickly took the side against the poor. Saint Francis, who lived from 1182 to 1226, was the founder of the Franciscan order. The son of a rich Italian merchant, Francis was something of a playboy in his youth. And when he got religion, his preaching reflected this. It was full of chivalric notions right out of the troubadours. He wooed "My lady poverty." He made friends with the animals as if he lived in a fairy tale. His tone was good humored and popular and so were his followers. The founder of the Dominicans was Saint Dominique who lived from 1170 to 1221. He was a Castilian nobleman much more sober and austere than Francis and not playful at all. He was interested in education and spiritual conformity and intellectual conformity. In the thirteenth century, when inquisitors were appointed to investigate heresy and stamp it out, most of the inquisitors were Dominicans. A Florentine Dominican named Savonarola was probably the most typical successor of St. Dominique in spirit. In 1494, he established a puritanical theocracy in Florence, and he ended up burned at the stake four years later by the very people who had cheered him on. Perhaps the greatest Dominican, however, was one of the most atypical—Aquinas, St. Thomas Aquinas, who died in 1274. Aquinas was less a preacher and more a philosopher, who reconciled reason and faith. According to Aquinas, our understanding of God's will did not depend on some miraculous revelation; rather God made man reasonable so that he could analyze and handle nature. God also made man free so he could operate within nature, within secular society, to the greater glory of God. You can see how well this fitted an age that was still deeply religious, but one in which men were beginning to take their fate into their own hands.

But this age was also the age of strife between pope and emperor, between the religious and secular power. And, ironically, it was Aquinas, the great Catholic theologian who provided a solid, intellectual foundation for a state that was secular and rational, where princes administered a justice that was not purely arbitrary, but based on logical, predictable, codified procedures as in the Roman law, that the twelfth century was rediscovering in the new universe. Aquinas laid down as a principle that human right was not destroyed by the divine right. The pope was God's vicar on earth and the Church was preeminent in spiritual matters. But in matters of civil good, it was better to obey secular power than spiritual power. And furthermore, law and justice, which Aquinas saw as part of the reason of God, were accessible to us simply by using our own human reasoning. And this, in turn, meant that law and justice were accessible to all reasoning men, whether Christian or pagan. If you want to press the argument, the light of reason did not depend on the Church. It shined over all humanity and all humanity was part of the same community. Now, today, we came to see this as a cliche, but this community of man was potentially a very subversive force in an age of rigid social distinctions as we shall see in our next program.

#124 The National Monarchies

Internal conflicts, foreign wars, helped to break down the feudal order. Terrified of anarchy, and sick of it, people turned to new images of stability. The central authority of the crown, the organized state, and a new era of organized violence began.
The National Monarchies this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time, we ended with Saint Thomas Aquinas, the great Catholic theologian of the thirteenth century, who argued that all men, Christian and pagan, basked in the light of God's reason and were all part of the same community. But a disciple of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a Florentine known by the name of Dante, was going to take this one step further. For Dante, who was profoundly Catholic, the ideal unity under God was not the Church, but humanity. And of this, the Roman Empire was the destined servant and instrument. In Dante's eyes, the state had a providential mission toward the human race, a mission that was the same in the natural order as the mission of the church was in the spiritual order. This exaltation of the state was almost unique in Medieval literature, but it was significant because it looked forward to the Renaissance, to the national monarchies, and to the new humanist culture that would supplant the old order of the Middle Ages.

Dante, who lived from 1265 to 1321, was a genius. He was a great poet, whose greatest work was a long poem called The Divine Comedy. He was a great dreamer, profoundly affected both by Christian tradition and by the Latin classics. But he was also a typical Florentine bourgeois, deeply involved in local politics and profoundly hostile to the pope. He spent much of his life as a political exile and as a critic of much that he saw around him.

It is sometimes difficult to remember that the rise of the middle class, which Dante in this case represented, the rise of the middle class introduced the factor of great instability in a previously stable society. The activities and claims of the middle classes reverberated at all levels of society, rendering the aristocracy insecure, turning city governments upside down, setting the peasants on the move, even permitting the large scale wars of the period, especially the hundreds Years' War, by finding new ways to finance them.

By the fifteenth century, the old order was in a state of liquidation, and the problem was how to keep society afloat. Every great medieval institution had gone under, or was going under. Feudal chivalry was falling before archers and infantry, feudal castles were falling to gunpowder and artillery. The massive monuments of the Feudal Age were crumbling. The Holy Roman Empire became a federation of German states with the emperor as its President. The popes, exiled to their palaces at Avignon, functioned as executors of the French king's will; and then when they returned to Rome, the papacy was torn by factions supporting rival popes. This "Great Schism," as it was called, lasted another forty years. From 1378 to 1417, as many as three popes at one time contended for the support and the contributions of the faithful, and the papacy lost much of its prestige.

As industry and commerce grew, they undermined the social system which was based on landholding. The rising middle classes and the rising cities sapped the power of the feudal barons. Rent was being substituted for service, and the serfs were being emancipated so that the land could be sold for money, or so that their manpower could be used in other enterprises. And all of this broke down the old, self-sufficient manorial system. Everywhere there was change; everywhere there was disorder; everywhere the old ways were being challenged or replaced by new ones. And this universal welter seemed to carry a menace of anarchy. That was what people were most afraid of—no clear social or moral order, just a struggle for power with no holds barred, a situation in which, as Shakespeare describes it in Troilus and Cressida, "There would be no justice, and no right or wrong. Force would be right. Then everything includes itself in power, power into will, will into appetite, and appetite a universal wolf so doubly seconded with will and power must make, perfervor, a universal prey and last eat up himself."

It was because they were afraid of anarchy, and indeed had very good reason to be so; it was because of this that the people turned to the central power which represented the very essence of order: the national monarchy. Kings had already reduced the Holy Roman Emperor, who was their nominal lord, to a shadow. Now they turned against the power of their nominal subordinates, the feudal lords. The struggle between the central authority of the crown and the disruptive, decentralized forces of feudalism was going to end, at last, in the crown's triumph, and the internal unity imposed by the King was then going to prepare the way for external expansion.

France was first in the field. Jean d'Arc, Joan of Arc, was the inspirer and the patron saint of this outburst of French patriotism, produced by the misery and the humiliation of the Hundred Year's War. The daughter of a well-to-do peasant family, Joan believed she heard voices from angels and God, who told her to rally her fellow Frenchmen drive out the English. Her martyrdom in 1431 at the hands of an ecclesiastical tribunal in English-controlled Rouen made her an even more powerful symbol of French resistance. By the second half of the fifteenth century, the war with England was over, feudal divisions were being mastered, and the foundations were laid for a national army and a national system of finance.
It was then up to Louis XI in the second half of the fifteenth century to consolidate the monarchy as the core of a centralized state. After Louis XI and after his successor, Louis XII, the remnants of feudal independence were crushed, and France began to expand at the cost of weaker neighbors. Province after province was incorporated into the French monarchy and, before the end of the fifteenth century, the strength of the new-formed nation was going to push across the Alps and into Italy. Meanwhile, other states were following the French example. Ferdinand of Aragon married Isabella of Castile, drove the Moors out of Andalusia, and founded the modern kingdom of Spain. Before long, Spain would also be pushing outside her borders over the Atlantic into America and over the Mediterranean to challenge the French in Italy.

In England, after 1495, Henry VII was going to bring peace and order to the country, while on the other side of Europe, a series of marriages was creating another power. Maximilian of Austria married the heiress of Burgundy in the fifteenth century and united the Netherlands with Austria. His son, the Archduke Philip, married the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, and their two sons were Charles V, Emperor of the Spanish Empire, and Ferdinand I, who married the daughter of the King of Hungary and Bohemia and founded the Austro-Hungarian monarchy—a lot of family details that probably bore you, but that set the basis, the structure, of European politics for the next few hundred years. And so, as the fifteenth century turned to the sixteenth, the political system of Europe was roughly sketched out; although the boundaries of the rival kingdoms were still undetermined, and there remained minor principalities and powers, especially in Germany and Italy, which offered an easy prey to their ambitious neighbors.

In Germany, the king was also emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, which extended over hundreds of independent principalities and duchies. So he could only attain his office by agreeing not to enforce his authority, and the empire, in effect, was the tomb of German national unity. The unity of Italy, meanwhile, was prohibited not only by the rival ambitions of its cities and princes, but also by the position of the popes. This is Leo X, who became pope in 1513. Leo and his successors could not tolerate a secular rival in the peninsula, and, although the papacy was never strong enough or durable enough to unite Italy itself, it was always influential enough to keep anyone else from doing it, even if that meant calling in outsiders to help.

And so Italy, like Germany, was ruled out of the national race and had to wait three hundred years for the national consolidation which its rivals achieved by the sixteenth century. Now, this period was also a time of more contact between states, as political and territorial definition grew, and this increased contact, in turn, led to the development of new political forms to handle it. Squatters isolated on a large plain have little need for organized communication, but when they stake out their claims right up to their neighbor's property, they see each other more often, they watch each other more closely, they tend to fight. And that's what happened with the national states. Before the era of national expansion, diplomatic relations had been rare and spasmodic and ambassadors were only dispatched on special occasions; but during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, ambassadors became regular and resident.

These two French ambassadors were painted in 1533; and while the modern diplomatic system was growing out of the necessity of countries busy watching each other, modern international law was growing out of the need to adjust the increasing number of international disputes and out of the calculations based on each state's jealousy of the other's growth, the idea of the balance of power grew as well. There were other changes. As the area over which the monarch ruled increased, his authority within his own dominions also increased.

This is Louis XII, going off to assert his authority, actually not in France but in Italy. Every extension of the king's sway intensified his dignity and lifted him higher above his subjects. Local liberties and feudal rights which checked a duke of Brittany or a king of Aragon were much less effective against a king of France like Francis I, or a king of Spain, who had more soldiers, higher revenues, and better credit. Feudal and local powers fought a long holding action against the crown for hundreds of years, but the tendency was against them once the king became the symbol of national unity and the center of national aspirations. And this monarch gained as much from the growth of the new ideas as he did from the decay of the old. The Renaissance, which we shall discuss in detail next time, the revived study of Roman civil law, and eventually the Reformation; all of these would contribute to the growth of royal power. Even scholars who worked with their pens and who had to live on pensions, contributed to it; pensions, after all, can be more easily gotten from princes than from parliaments, because parliaments don't regard purely intellectual achievements as a service to the state. And so, the scholars looked to the King, and the King got his reward in the praise he received from the world of letters.
Helped by new benefactors, scholars and artists had the means to study the mythology, literature, and art of the Romans, and from there to rediscover the Roman's political organization and their laws, all of which had a significant effect on European thinking. Just as the classical Latin of ancient Rome seemed superior to medieval Latin, dismissed as "dog Latin," so Roman Imperial law seemed superior to the barbarousness of European common law and feudal custom. As scholars rediscovered Roman law, its study and application spread outward from the Italian universities, first into the lands of the Holy Roman Empire, whose emperors regarded themselves as the successors of Imperial Rome, and then into the rest of Europe. So, by the fifteenth century, the maxims of Roman law were everywhere, and our civil laws are all marked by it.

Nothing could have suited the new kings better, because the old common law and feudal customs were based on local interests and constituted checks on any central power. The maxim of the Roman law, however, was that the will of the King was law, and this was a maxim that could be quoted against lords, or popes, or parliaments. There was also the Roman tradition of deifying emperors, and by the sixteenth century, some European courtiers were almost inclined to pay similar honors to their kings. To understand their attitude, you have to remember the misrule of the previous age, the decline and failure of the previous systems, and the strength of popular demand for a firm, masterful hand at the wheel. There is a modern myth that people have always tended toward democracy, constitutions, electoral rights; but, in truth, love of freedom has never been the predominant note of popular politics. At most times, popular demand has been for a strong government. The government of the kings was never good, but it seemed better, at least for a while, than the anarchy that preceded it. Authoritarian stability was better than authoritarian anarchy. The violence of an organized state was preferred to the blind violence of a disorganized feudalism, and in the fourteenth century any state that could afford it had means of violence, more efficient and more expensive than ever before. Strong government and capital-intensive warfare traditionally go together. That's because the power that controls the weapons can enforce its will, and the first thing it enforces is taxation to pay for more weapons. Taxation, in turn, reinforces the central authority and its bureaucracy and makes it more efficient. So, the better the weapons and the military that used them, the greater the central authority and its capacity to tax and control and the stronger its growth at the expense of its subjects and other lesser powers.

The 1300s and 1400s saw the appearance of weapons that would affect history down to our own day—guns and gunpowder. Centuries before, the Byzantines had used "Greek fire," fireballs that helped them beat off the Slavs and the Arabs. These fireballs were shot from catapults, but increasingly from tubes as well; so when the idea of guns with metal tubes reached Europe from India and China in the thirteenth century, there were European weapon makers who could copy them. Cannon and cannonballs made of iron or stone were useful against walls, ships and troops in close formation. Turkish cannon battered down the walls of Constantinople in 1453. French cannon helped drive out the English at the end of the Hundreds' Years War. And there were also handguns. An English general was killed by a handgun in the last battle of the Hundred's Years War in 1452.

By the 1500s, the arquebus, the musket, and the rifle came into their own and became the core weapon of modern infantry, also the key to European power beyond Europe. It would be handguns that won much of America for Spain and the East Indies for the Spaniards, Portuguese, English and Dutch. In Mexico, the guns of the Spanish were thought to produce lightning—it would be difficult for any man to stand up against controlled lightning. And so the future lay with Europe's more modern armies, equipped with artillery like the French armies that conquered Italy after the 1490s, and equipped with handguns that won America for the Spaniards and gave the Spanish infantry a superiority that dominated Europe into the seventeenth century.

After all, not everybody could build a gun. You needed arsenals and expensive equipment. By the sixteenth century, Spain and other states were spending two-thirds of their revenue on weapons. Naturally, countries with plenty of iron ore and a superior metallurgy had a great advantage, and that meant central Europe, France, and, in due course, the Swedes. The new weapons also meant that cities and feudal lords were no longer safe behind their walls. Modern warfare based on guns and gunpowder dispensed once and for all with castles, with knights in armor, and also with the culture of chivalry and the culture of independent cities. It opened the age of the modern state, interested in order, in taxes, and in strong, ever stronger institutions. So war and government and the world, in general, have all been transformed by gunpowder.

Those of you who don't like the idea of a strong interventionist state will deplore this development, and I really see the point; but you have to remember the robber barons, and the general disorder that went before. The days of Romeo and Juliet may seem romantic, but they were also days of gang warfare and terror and bloodshed. A lot of English and French and Italians were glad to see noble knights replaced by the King's Peace, fragile as it was, and as it still is. Next time, the Renaissance, until then . . .
#125 The Renaissance and The Age Of Discovery

Was it the beginning of a new modern world, a world of imagination, action, enterprise; or was it the culmination of the Middle Ages which had lasted for nearly a thousand years; or was it a bit of both?

The Renaissance and the Age of Discovery this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

I told you a few programs back that the Middle Ages were invented by the Renaissance. But the Renaissance was invented by itself. I don't mean that people in the fourteenth or fifteenth century conjured up the word, but they acted as if they might do so at any time, because they felt so excited by what was going on around. Now, part of what was going on was the same old mess as before and after: wars, injustice, violence, misery. What we call the Renaissance, after all, ran from about the fourteenth century through the sixteenth. So it overlapped the late Middle Ages for more than a hundred years. But there was an important difference. There were serious economic problems, but there was more enterprise, more wealth, more leisure in the Renaissance, and also more competition in the conspicuous consumption that went with wealth and leisure. And one form of consumption that especially soared was culture. Culture which adored and pursued antiquity with an extraordinary urgency and passion. Their literature and architecture and visual arts soared, and their achievements made contemporaries feel that they lived in a time when men were at last on the way to recapture the greatness of the ancients, those ancients against whom the West had measured itself for one thousand years.

If you want to be objective, the West had been reviving since the twelfth century at least. The great cathedrals hadn't waited for the fourteenth century. And previous generations had translated the Greeks that studied philosophy and the laws of nature, had made technological improvements. In the thirteenth century, chimney construction made heating more flexible and, thus, made privacy possible for the better off. The chimney probably affected the art of love more than the troubadours did, and it fostered more individualism than Renaissance philosophers did. And without another contemporary invention, eyeglasses, we probably would have had fewer philosophers anyway.

Among other inventions of the twelfth century was the spinning wheel, which not only made yarn cheaper, but also suggested the use of a belt to transmit power; and the wheelbarrow, which cut in half the number of people needed to haul small loads by substituting a wheel for the front man, and even the button, which revolutionized the history of clothing. So the Middle Ages was often inventive and increasingly productive. But what changed most in the fourteenth century was the mood, perhaps because what was being done was less to the glory of God—and more to the glory of man. You can see this in literature where the rebirth of ancient Latin and ancient Greek revived the Greek belief in "man as the measure of all things" and introduced subversive notions of a life unencumbered by revealed religion.

It's characteristic that this secularizing spirit was represented by men and sometimes by women, who call themselves humanists, because they were interested in human nature and human values. To put it differently—they were trying to discover the secret of the good life, the virtuous life. And they thought they could find it, not in the centuries just past where no model seemed to fit their bill, but by looking back at antiquity. If you read Seneca or Cicero and if you wrote like them, then you could hope to become as good, or as great, as they had been.

So, the Humanists revived the classics and they studied and they taught them in the humanities which were supposed to teach you to be good, that is, virtuous, and honorable in private, and especially in public. The humanities stressed personal judgment, the worth and possibilities of individuals, man's free will, his superiority over uniformed, unpolished nature, his duty to society; and they are at the origins of the classical curriculum, which was going to last into the twentieth century. The typical Renaissance humanist was a professional scholar. Today he would be a professor. Like many professors a lot of humanists were chiefly interested in splitting hairs or coming out with learned quotes. But, also like some professors, humanists wanted to prepare their students and readers to operate wisely in the world. Ideally, most of these students would be princes or courtiers or men and women who excise some power around them. Certainly, they would have to be educated because they had to know Latin.

One of the most famous humanists of the Renaissance was a Dutch monk, Desiderius Erasmus, who lived from 1466 to 1536. When he wasn't editing texts, Erasmus dedicated himself to teaching morals and culture, good manners, common sense, civility and the Christian virtues; all of which were as singularly lacking in his day as they are today. But I prefer one of his Italian contemporaries, Niccolo Machiavelli. Machiavelli was a less erudite man
but more inclined to think for himself, and what this produced, you can see, if you read his little book, *The Prince*. Machiavelli has been much condemned as cynical and immoral because his book describes power politics as they are and not as they should be. But Machiavelli had a lot of experience with politics in one of the most politicized cities of the time, Florence. This is the court of Lorenzo the Magnificent who ruled the city when Machiavelli was growing up there. In the mess that followed Lorenzo's death, Machiavelli learned to consider politics as a jungle, where the strong take what they can, the weak go to the wall and ordinary people fare better under strong rulers than under weak ones.

In a way, Machiavelli simply described what he saw around. More important, though, he separated metaphysics from politics. Religion, or morality, or law became just another factor of political action like armies, like taxes. And this was a radical break from medieval traditions; but apart from Machiavelli and perhaps I should add Thomas Moore, most humanists have little to say to us today. Their writings are not very readable, they're overstuffed with classical references and quotes. It's much more exciting and much more accessible to trace the new spirit of the Renaissance in the visual arts, which really illustrates the vigor and excitement of the time and its focus on human possibilities.

You can begin to see the change by contrasting the great mosaics of the eleventh and twelfth centuries with the work of Giotto, who lived during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries in Florence, in the early days of the Renaissance. Many of Giotto's contemporaries still created great majestic, hypnotic figures of authority and power or else they painted puppet shows in the impersonal Byzantine manner, full of lifeless mannequins in splendid attire. But, Giotto's work was affected by the new revival of classical ideals and especially by the new humanity that Saint Francis has brought to religion. Giotto's approach was emotional and urgent. Unlike the stiff manner of the Middle Ages, it expressed a new humanity. So Giotto was innovative but he was also profoundly Christian and medieval. Characteristically his best known paintings can be seen in a chapel in Padua called the Scrovegni Chapel because it was built by the son of a usurer of that name. Old Mr. Scrovegni was so notorious that Dante placed him in one of the circles of Hell in the *Inferno*. So here you have a typical medieval act of redemption. The usurer son holds out his chapel in a propitiatory gesture to make up for the ill-gotten family wealth.

Now, compare this with a picture painted in 1434, one hundred years after Giotto's death; Jan van Eyck's portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife. We are in Bruges, but the subject is an Italian merchant and his young bride. We are in the house of a businessman and the money lender like Scrovegni, but the couple is presented as if they were nobles and they make no apologies for their money. And look at the realism and the precision of presentation which are in keeping with the rationality of a new, more secular society. Fifty years go by, and Botticelli is painting his Birth of Venus in Florence around 1485. By this time, spiritual concerns had been drained out, not from all life, of course, far from it, but from this painting. All Botticelli seems to care about is sensuousness and recreating the ancients. He takes an ancient subject, he tries to paint it as the ancients would have done, and he revels not in spiritual, but in sensuous beauty.

Then another fifty years go by, and Michelangelo paints the "Last Judgment" on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel, finishing in 1541. It's an overwhelming composition and the best thing really is just to look at it and gasp. I mention it here because it's so different from any kind of medieval Christian spirit of hierarchy or order. And in the same room, there are also frescoes that Michelangelo painted a quarter century earlier. These are about the Creation and they look to me like a powerful, explosive affirmation of man. So, in these two works, the Renaissance has really supplanted the Middle Ages. When he painted the "Last Judgment," Michelangelo was an old man in his sixties. Rome had been sacked and pillaged a few years before and the old sense of unlimited possibilities had started to crack. But, the thing that strikes me is that whether in a vision of torment, doubt, defeat or in a vision of affirmation, you can find here in a Vatican Chapel at the center of Western Christendom, you can find here one of the ongoing themes of the modern Western world. Man is great! He's always in trouble, but he's the most impressive thing we've got. And this is a theme you wouldn't have found four hundred years before.

This greatness of man was going to be proved and accelerated in another way by the invention of printing from movable type, which occurred in Germany around 1445 and which we attribute to a goldsmith called Gutenberg. By 1480, over a hundred and ten European towns had printing shops. And by 1500, about twenty million books had been printed. And the sixteenth century was going to see at least ten times more than that. The humanists quickly realized the advantage of cheaper and more numerous books; so did the Church. At first, most of the books were for clerks and clergers anyway. And most of them were in Latin, which meant that access to reading was limited. But by the sixteenth century, this changed. Magistrates, burgheers, and tradesmen owned books often in their own language. A publishing industry grew up to cater to more simple people with pious books and entertaining books and almanacs. And chivalric romances of adventure and glory were turned out in vast numbers by Italian and Span-
ish printers who fed the dreams of future conquistadors. And in fact during the fifteenth century and the first half of
the sixteenth, the Renaissance, a period of intense and passionate cultural achievement, was going to coexist with the
Age of Discovery, a period of fervent expansion. Just as there had never been so much variety and creativity in the
arts, so too, had there never been so much exploration and discovery.

When Bartholomeu Diaz rounds the Cape of Good Hope in 1487, Botticelli is helping to paint the Sistine
Chapel in Rome. In 1506, Columbus dies impoverished, forgotten, still believing he discovered the coast of Asia.
And the same year, Bramante begins to build Saint Peter's in Rome. In 1513, Balboa crosses the Isthmus of Panama
to reveal the existence of the Pacific, and Machiavelli publishes *The Prince*. Raphael dies in 1520 when Magellan is
sailing around the world, and a rebellion is gathering in Germany around a monk named Martin Luther, a rebellion
which would soon burst into the Reformation. And in the 1530s while Pizarro is conquering Peru, Erasmus and
Rabelais are in full bloom, while Michelangelo is painting his "Last Judgment" on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel.

The Renaissance and the Age of Discovery were two peaks of achievement. One of imagination, the other
of action. But did they have anything in common? Is it possible to say that Erasmus wrote and Raphael painted,
and Bartholomeu Diaz ventured past the Cape of Storms in obedience to a similar impulse? And was this impulse
derived from some common experience? A way of thinking, an approach to living that historians have agreed to
call the European Renaissance. Did the urge to discover new lands grow from the intellectual ferment of the Ren-
naissance? And what effect did the broadening of geographical horizons have on the mental horizons of the people
at home?

The first thing we can say is that human nature did not change, but the scope of human aspirations was
increased by greater material possibility. By the 1480s and '90s Europe had developed an agricultural base, an indus-
trial capacity, a superiority in arms and a skill in sailing the oceans that enabled it to explore the rest of the globe
to conquer and loot and colonize it for the next four centuries in a way that the greediest ancient Roman would have
envied. Many of the material things that made this exploration possible, however, came out of the Middle Ages. The
magnetic compass was adopted by 1187, sea charts and pilot books were available after 1280. And the ships and the
guns that explorers used were not developed by Renaissance intellectuals but by craftsmen. And just as the means
of exploration developed out of the Middle Ages, so did the motives behind it. This is the reception of Columbus by
Ferdinand and Isabella. They and other rulers were interested in gold and silver to supplement dwindling sources at
home, and in slaves, and in spices from the East which were necessary in the first place to preserve food which
spoiled fast in the ages before refrigeration. And then quite simply to make lousy food edible—tough and stringy
meat from skinny cattle, tasteless vegetables, unappetizing and often spoiled food in general. But this spice trade was
threatened by the advance of a new Muslim power, the Turks, who took Constantinople in 1453 and the Balkans as
well, thus upsetting the commercial balance of the Mediterranean. Before that, Italy had enjoyed a near monopoly
of the spice-trade for several centuries, which was the source of much of its prosperity. So, the countries of western
Europe sought to out-flank the Turks and the Italians as well. France, Spain, Portugal, England, and the Netherlands
all saw the possibilities of sailing south or sailing west to reach the East Indies and they had the means to do it.
Another motive, universally expressed and quite widely believed was the desire to extend Christianity. And here, too,
the Age of Discovery did not see something new, but the redirection of an earlier medieval motive which had linked
conquest and gain with missionary enthusiasm in the crusades which Europe had sent out since the eleventh century.
This crusading ideal had declined precipitously, but it was revived by the advance of the Turks in the southern and
eastern Mediterranean and by the fall of Constantinople, and it was maintained by the war against the Moors in
Spain which only ended, significantly, in 1492, at which point the Spanish Crown finally gave Columbus permission to
sail.

The most Renaissance aspect of discovery lay in the cooperation between the Crown, geographical experts,
and highly educated merchants out for profit, but also very curious and increasingly well-informed. And we can
find aspects of a new mentality among seamen and travelers as well. We find it in a Venetian called Cadamosto
who said that, "He joined the Portuguese sailing down the African coast in 1455 and 1456 in order to see interesting
sights." And we find it in another Italian, Antonio Pegafetta, who joined Magellan's expedition sixty years later "to
experiment," he said, "and go and see with my own eyes a part of those things we have heard so much about." And
finally we find it in the great explorers themselves, who were not just believers and seamen. But, who had to visual-
ize their undertaking within the context of an emerging knowledge of the world as a whole, testing the hypothesis of
medieval geography, and developing them into a new science altogether, as we shall see in our next program.
The discovery of new societies confronted Europeans with a dazzling range of beliefs and institutions different from their own. It persuaded some that the world was their oyster, and it led others to begin a revolution in critical thinking.

The Renaissance and the New World this time on *The Western Tradition*.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time we ended with a confluence of two great movements, the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. And yet, we also saw how many of the material things that made exploration possible came out of the Middle Ages, as did many of the motivations of European governments. Primarily, the quest for spices, and slaves, and converts to Christianity. But, what about the explorers themselves? Do they reflect a new Renaissance mentality that we define as modern, or was their vision primarily a medieval one? What kind of men were they? What motivated them?

As evidence, we have Richard Chancellor’s statement that he was describing his search for a northeast passage in 1553, so that as he says: “He may encourage others to the like travel.” Now this is a very modern kind of self-awareness and an equally modern sense of being part of an evolution—not a one-shot adventure like Marco Polo’s trip to China in the thirteenth century, but an ongoing process, and both are very close to the intellectual temper of the Renaissance. And there is another Renaissance trait which the explorers possessed, and that is their appetite for fame. The passion for glory provides a major theme of Renaissance art, especially with the presentation of distinguished contemporaries as memorable characters from antiquity. This is John Francisco Gonzla, an Italian Captain General depicted as Mars, the god of war, while his wife Isabella is Venus.

Some explorers, like Columbus, were also fired by missionary zeal; but fame, the desire to be known for having accomplished great deeds; this was a strong component in the explorer’s motivation. And that became especially true as more and more travel writing came on the market, as printing spread and began to compete with romances of chivalry.

So here you have the search for fame, the search for fortune, but within a context of exactness and full proof, and in a world where it seemed that very few things were still left undone; and if they were undone that was a good reason for getting them done. And this is very much a Renaissance pattern. But we are on even firmer ground when we turn, oddly enough, to fear. Fear was the fuel of action in the Renaissance, as it had not been in the Middle Ages. The revival of antiquity, the rediscovery of theories which appeared to have influenced action in the past, produced new concepts and models for action that would change the world.

The humanists, or at least their pupils, really try to be the all-around men that Cicero praised. The architects and artists were actually affected by theoretical treatises based on assumptions about what had produced great art in ancient times. And the soldiers who now had longer pauses between crises adopted all sorts of military ideas from the ancients about how to organize their troops, or fortify, or besiege a city. And it might have had the same effect on geography if it hadn’t been for the actual voyages which forced Renaissance scholars to reconsider their theories about the size and shape of the world in the light of actual experience.

Not all of the classical theories agreed either. Ptolemy, a second century Greek, was one established authority who believed that you couldn’t sail around the world because Africa merged with a large continent that filled the southern hemisphere and joined Africa to India. On the other hand, there was the geographer Strabo, a contemporary of Augustus, who thought that the ocean sea to the west washed the southern shores of Asia. You had to be careful when you sailed the ocean because you might fall over the edge. Still, Strabo believed, to quote him, that, “The uninhabited world forms a complete circle itself—meeting itself. So that if the immensity of the Atlantic did not prevent it, we could sail from Iberia to India along one and the same parallel.”

By the early 1400s, Strabo's theories were gaining ground, as sea charts and ship logs got better. There was also constant contact between the sailors, the theorists, and the map makers. The best example of this could be found at Sagres, at the southwest tip of Portugal, where in the middle 1430s, the Portuguese Prince Henry the Navigator, a remarkable figure founded a small court to which he attracted seamen, cartographers, astronomers, shipbuilders, and instrument makers; and from which, with improved ships and maps and instruments, he sent out expeditions that went further and further down the African coast, practically to the Ivory Coast. Henry's ultimate
purpose, and he wasn't alone in this, was to outflank the power of Islam, and to establish direct commercial contact with a source of gold, and slaves, ivory, and spices in Africa and in Asia. So Henry's brother went to Florence to buy maps, and Columbus elicited an important letter from another Florentine geographer, Toscanelli, that assured him that he could get to China by sailing west. And when the sailors made their discoveries, they were quickly recorded in the maps the cartographers drew up and revised for other sailors to use. This map belonged to Columbus.

In essence, this process of exploration was the first demonstration of the scientific method, proceeding from hypothesis to experiment and then on to a new hypothesis. And it was demonstrated for all interested men to see, in the largest and the most dramatic way. The hypothesis that there was open water between Europe and Asia to the west, as Columbus first believed, was disproved not by abstract calculation, but concretely by revealing an enormous new territory full of exotic peoples and providing a new way of life for thousands of soldiers and settlers. And it was a continuous process with the findings and ideas of one man entered on maps until further experimental voyages disproved them or revised them.

What you have to remember is that the scientific method which we take as the hallmark of modern thinking could not be applied rigorously in a pure scientific field—in astronomy, or physics, or chemistry, until the seventeenth century when the pendulum clock, and the telescope, and the microscope were developed. Before that, however hard the would-be scientist fought, it was difficult to verify his ideas because the means for scientific proof were rudimentary. One field where you could actually verify theory was the field of discovery through the cooperation between the theorizers at home and the observers in their ships. You might even say that the first scientific laboratory was the world itself.

So the Age of Discovery and the Renaissance were in partnership. But it was a fumbling and confused relationship because the first explorers carried with them a mass of medieval presuppositions which prevented them from making a properly objective report on what they saw. What the public wanted, and got a lot of, were monsters and marvels, and giants and dwarfs, and headless men with faces in their chests, and dog-headed men, and men with one huge foot which they could use as a sun shade, and all kinds of other grotesques.

Another feature in the new lands that people wanted to find or to hear about was the existence of an earthly paradise, some golden age existence where men could be found happy, naked, free, without government or property, without disease or melancholy. One major reason why Europeans wanted to believe in the existence of paradise was that they feared so badly at home, where they were torn by war, eaten by plague, brutalized by poverty, and famine and all kinds of other troubles. So explorers were tempted to color their facts to fit their hopes, and publicists popularized and vulgarized their reports to turn the Indian into a noble savage, and life in the New World into a kind of moral symbol of the golden age. But these fantasies were going to collide with something else, something very urgent and very concrete, which was the religious issue. Significantly, the first question European intellectuals asked about the natives of the New World was not what are they like, but can they be saved. And that was because the societies being discovered the New World did not fit into the framework of the book of Genesis. So it wasn't clear whether Jesus died for these creatures and whether they were really human at all.

The question was important because the sort of treatment the Indian might expect depended on the answer. The view that the Indian was an animal, hence a natural slave; this view was pressed with some force. Sixteenth century Englishmen for instance, assumed that the Indians were on the whole wild, ignorant, and animal-like. For their part, the Indians quite sensibly refused to work the hours, wear the clothes, or follow the diet of Europeans. So the way was open for the pessimists to point out that Indians were incapable of living virtuously and freely, and that they must therefore be, by nature, slaves. This notion fitted very well with the growing clamor for cheap labor to work in silver mines like this one in Peru, or on sugar estates in a climate which sapped the energy of white men and which would soon take the lives of the natives. Even worse would be the devastating European diseases for which Indians had no immunities. With European brutality confirmed by economic need, with forceable conversion to Christianity accepted as common necessity, the slave trade took on a new and long-enduring lease on life, or rather death. While, in this painting, a European artist depicts Indians worshiping a column erected by the French explorer de La Verendrye.

So here we find several further ingredients of the modern world—a new treasury of myth and of incentives on one hand, and on the other, the role of the European as exploiter and colonist, rationalizing his activities by drawing on those very myths to justify his doings.
And yet the counteragents were at work within the experience itself. Above all, the novel tendency to compare and contrast which arose out of the variety of new information and experience pouring in on Europeans during the Renaissance, where medieval people reasoned by association, learning about one thing by connecting it with something similar, modern reasoning evolves contrast as well as association. This is different from that, "What do I learn from the comparison?", and this kind of thinking entered our intellectual habits not only when the humanists of the Renaissance revised the civilization of pre-Christian antiquity and compared it with our own, but also when newly discovered societies all over the world confronted Europeans with a wide range of governments, and religions, and social habits that were different from their own.

But before the sophisticated races of the East or the more primitive races of the West could present thought-provoking contrasts, they had to be seen not merely as picturesque, but as the product of a specific environment. You had to go beyond the striking detail, the nakedness, the war paint, you had to go on to a more anthropological approach. And you begin to find this when one of Vasco DeGama's officers spends the night with the natives of the Cape of Good Hope to see how they live, and what they eat, or when missionaries begin to learn the languages and the religious beliefs of the peoples they were trying to convert, because they could only hope to convince the natives when they had entered into their world and values. And by the sixteenth century, the greatest mind of the sixteenth century, I mean Michel de Montaigne, is fascinated by cannibals, by so-called savages who seem far less savage and far closer to happiness and virtue than his own fellow citizens. Not just far less savage, more sensible too; cannibals kill, but they kill for a purpose, they want to eat. "We," says Montaigne, "we kill to no good purpose." And, so here, four hundred years ago, we can hear the forest murmurs of relativism. But it was very far away, and it was going to be a very slow process, that culminated in the eighteenth century when the comparative study of strange societies and religions and brave new worlds would lead to a critical reevaluation of European religion, philosophy, and political structures.

But that had its roots, I think, in the Renaissance, in the growing willingness based on a growing necessity to see, estimate, evaluate, test, to learn more and actually use it. Invest it, so to speak in order to learn more still, to seek not only knowledge, but precise knowledge; to examine not only the self, subjectively, which was one of the great joys of Renaissance humanists, but the world, objectively. Because objectivity was the great liberator, the widener of mental horizons, the progenitor of modern science. It was fed by forcing the imagination not inward, but outward, exposing it to challenging information about different ways of life. It was the humanists like Erasmus who laid the ground for this critical and comparative approach to information and experience. And when Erasmus and the other humanists said that one authority was superior to another, that a Roman author was a better source of wisdom than a doctor of the medieval Church, they implied the right to decide between different authorities, and therefore the possibility to judge for yourself.

And the best of them, like Leonardo da Vinci, decided to place experience and experiment above any book, above any second-hand authority, and this was something new. Leonardo was not only a great painter of subtlety and understated harmony, he was also a great architect and engineer. His great love was scientific observation, especially anatomy. He was fascinated by the forces that moved nature. This sketch is from his study of hydrology, the properties of water. And he approached these forces in a thoroughly empirical way; when he works out his geological theories he doesn't look for a text in Aristotle, he looks around him. He notes that things that are born in salt water are found on high mountains far from present seas. And he concludes the phenomena we witness explains the past. He dissected bodies, he suggests the possibilities of comparative anatomy, he predicts the helicopter, and when he dies in France in 1519, his title is First Painter, Architect, and Mechanic of the King.

Soon after Leonardo's death, a French physician, Ambrose Pere, provided the formula of the new scientific approach to scientific observation, that we have to use the ancients as stilts or towers, from which we can see further than they did. "But," said Pere, "whenever experiment contradicted the ancients, we must follow what we see." Tradition is no use if it just encourages you to go on making other people's mistakes because you're too lazy or too timid to strike out for yourself. I would prefer to do everything by myself than to fall into error with the sages, and even with all mankind. "Knowledge," says Pere, "is a great thing, but only if its based on experience."

This new attitude was going to lead men to examine things for themselves--natural phenomena, political institutions, even the Bible. Until the Renaissance, all these had been accepted simply because they were there; now they could be considered in terms of appropriateness, effectiveness, and opportunity.

Obviously, this didn't all happen at once. Most people conformed as they had always done without much question. But the fact remains that by the 1600s, knowledge and science had ceased to rest on an inert tradition transmitted from the past. They became the knowledge, science, investigation of "what is" which you acquire by
searching, and looking, and drawing conclusions from what you see. And this is a revolution, or at least its the
beginning of a revolution as we shall see in the programs ahead.

#127 The Reformation

A great religious revival sparked by a man driven to the edge of despair, an explosion of social unrest and
bitter political conflict, together they gave old enemies new battle cries and shook Christendom to its very core.

The Reformation this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

A lot of history is about kings and queens and battles because for a long time so much of history turned
around kings and queens and battles. The whims and personalities of princes and of the great men who served
them influenced policies, made wars, made treaties, affected the lives of everybody else. Now this rule had been
suspended during part of the Middle Ages when power had been restricted to a local scale, but as the fifteenth
century turned into sixteenth, modern monarch and modern monarchy appeared. They wanted to be all-powerful
and they persuaded their subjects that indeed they were, or at least they should be all-powerful. Even their guardian
angels were considered more important than the angels that guarded people of lesser rank.

There was Louis XI of France, who lived in the fifteenth century; Ferdinand of Spain, who straddled the
fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; and Henry VIII of England, who was born the year before Columbus sailed and
who died in 1547. These were the fathers of the modern state. It would take centuries to be perfected, but from the
very beginning, the modern state pursued four major tasks. First, to secure obedience, to neutralize all possible
challenges, to gain the monopoly of force, to maintain law and order, to make the violence it exerted the only legiti-
mate violence. And what this meant you can see in the gibssets that figure prominently in a lot of paintings. The
second thing the state had to achieve was to exert control over economic life, to facilitate the circulation and ex-
change of goods, to grasp as much as possible of national income. Third, it had to reconnect patriotic identity from the
local to the national scale. Here we see not only Henry III of France but also the lily or "fleur-de-lis" which had
become the symbol of French royalty. And finally, the state had to dominate or control the religious life of society,
or at least ally itself with the representatives of religion. Now we've already seen that the rise of the modern state
was dependent on both the growth of a modern economy of capital and account books like this one, and on the arms
that new technology made possible and the new economy made affordable. But it also owed a great deal to the
revival of Roman law which had survived in Italy and which after the thirteenth century spread through Europe
carried by lawyers trying to strengthen the king against the clergy and against his feudal vassals.

Roman law carried the idea of an absolute ruler--the princeps, whose will was law. This combined with
another classical idea, that of the hero, who is practically a god--strong, benevolent, and wise. This heroic royal
figure was going to incarnate what we today describe as nationalism. A sentiment of patriotic pride in origins and in
past glories which would be used to justify present dominion and future greatness. By the sixteenth century, Italians,
Spaniards, and Frenchmen learned to sing the glory of their particular country, to glorify a national character or a
national tongue. German humanists compared the German past to that of ancient Rome and inspired this triumphal
arch for their king and emperor Maximilian. Shakespeare's plays praised England, disparaged its neighbors, exalted
patriotic sentiment. The reference to the past which inspired the present could also focus on the ideal figure of the
prince, who personified his people and the nation. In theory, the prince answered the need for a strong central au-
thority to impose unity and order. In practice, the material interests of most princes were served by more law and
order; more law and order improved revenues; regular revenues paid for the regular armies that could impose more
law and order and squeeze more revenues thus further increasing the central power.

With this increasing centralization of the state, the modern relationship between the central authority and
the individual subject and taxpayer began to take shape. So did the representative institutions, the councils, par-
liaments, estates that marked the modern West and that are all related to taxes. When states and rulers no longer
turned for aid to vassals but to all their subjects, they had to win their consent. But popular assemblies composed of
all the citizens, as in the ancient Greek cities, were not feasible where the number of people and the distances be-
tween them were too great. And so as a substitute for personal attendance, there developed the concept of representa-
tion. The idea that certain men, elected or appointed, could speak for other men or cities or estates.
Some of these representative assemblies became instruments of opposition to royal authority. But for the most part, their very existence gave disparate territories a sense of unity they had not had before. Voting taxes and paying them didn't just affect the purses of people, it affected their minds as well. At the same time, the princes needed administrators. In France, whose kings were best served in these matters, there were some twelve thousand civil servants in 1505, one to about 1250 people. Four hundred years later, there would be one for every seventy Frenchmen and women and today there are all most as many state employees as there are citizens to be administered. The princes also needed soldiers to back up their officials, and above all, for war, which was the greatest industry of their time as it often is of our time. The princes also needed representatives for negotiations, for diplomacy, which is the continuance of war by other means and which the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were beginning to develop along with international law, a code that governed relations between sovereigns and between sovereign states. Meanwhile, medieval concepts were disappearing. The Holy See was not even a shadow of what it had once been. The pope was an Italian prince trading in what merchandise he had: ecclesiastical appointments, dispensations from the application of church law to permit divorce, absolved from adultery or even murder, indulgences which provided remission of sins in return for worthy acts or better still in return for payment. As for the emperor like Sigismund of Hungary, who was crowned in 1411, he had no power to tax or to impose his will outside his own territories. He was simply the highest bidder in the auction for the imperial crown of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1519 for example, Charles V, King of Spain was the winner. He had the backing of the great banking houses, especially the Fuggers of Augsburg who advanced most of the money to buy the electors and the pope and who, just as importantly, refused to credit the bank drafts of Charles's competitors.

It's from this point on that the power of money or finance capital dominates the world. Financial power created the armies with which the new emperor conquered his enemies and kept his huge empire together. Charles' grandfather, the Emperor Maximilian, had not been able to collect anything like regular taxes, so he hadn't been able to keep up anything like a real standing army. A few kings like Louis XI in France and Ferdinand of Aragon had got one, but Charles was the first emperor who managed to do this, and if changed economic conditions played their part, a new business outlook and the business alliance played equally important parts. Charles' son, Philip II, who lived from 1527 to 1598 was not only the king of Spain but also king of Portugal, which he inherited through his mother. He ruled an empire far greater than that of ancient Rome, an empire that stretched from the Americas to Asia. You have to imagine the scale of this empire in terms of what distance meant in the sixteenth century. A round trip from Lisbon to Goa in India took eighteen months; a trip from Seville in Spain to Lima in Peru took two years; and from Seville to Manila in the Philippines, which were named for Philip of course, it took up to five years. You can understand the remark of a Spanish vicery that if death came from Madrid, we should all live to a very old age. No doubt if death had come, it would have come by written order. Spanish government was government by paper and by the bureaucracy that shuffled the paper. The bureaucrats were trained in universities whose numbers in Spain tripled during the sixteenth century from eleven to thirty-three and which were also set up across the Atlantic. The University of Santo Domingo was founded in 1538, the first university in the Americas, a hundred years before Harvard College. Others followed in Mexico and Peru. And it was the flow of capital in the form of gold and silver from America that paid for the universities and the bureaucracy that lubricated the wheels of commerce, and fueled the military and political supremacy of Spain through the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, so Spain's American Empire made her European empire possible.

The new alliance between capital and the state would be disturbing for a lot of people, as would be the newly important part which money came to play in the life of a society whose members had managed without it, or with very little of it for a long time. There were waves of speculation, waves of bankruptcy, and these didn't just affect the bankers and the merchants but also a whole series of dependent industries and enterprises and, of course—workers. This was the crucial period when Europe switched from the more or less stable economic plane of the Middle Ages to an economic life that isn't really very different from our own. A life where the value of money fluctuated, unemployment became endemic, cities got overcrowded, and rising prices and lower wages were experienced everywhere. And the result of this was resentment, unrest, revolts in the trading cities, peasant risings in the countryside, and agitation by nobles suffering from inflation.

The social dissatisfaction created by this insecurity and unrest was going to come to a head in Germany and the Lowlands, and it was going to break out under the banner of a religious idea. On October 31, 1517, a monk named Martin Luther who taught theology at the University of Wittenburg in Saxony, nailed on the door of the castle church ninety-five theses, that is propositions or arguments, against the papal misuse of indulgences and absolution. Now Luther's gesture was contentious, but it was not revolutionary. Proposing a debate on a theological thesis was accepted practice. Luther's language was perfectly appropriate for academic debate, and yet the echo of his gesture was going to shake the Western world.
Religious war and religious rebellions invariably cut into political conflicts. They provide old enemies with new battle cries, they contribute new and profound causes of friction. Religious conflict ravaged Germany until the 1550s, France and the Netherlands through the second half of the century, and it threw England into political confusion. Within one generation the seamless robe of Western Christendom was rent. From then on, men stood divided by Christian faith as much as by political allegiance or economic interest. This was the Protestant Reformation.

Now obviously a religious contest on this scale doesn’t break out in an irreligious society. Luther himself is evidence of this. He was driven to the verge of madness by uncertainty and doubt and guilt and the terrible fear that he could never achieve salvation, until he realized that it’s not what you do, or don’t do, it’s what’s inside you that counts. Your faith in God and in His salvation, his free forgiving mercy that are more important than your weakness, your failings, your feeble attempts to stone. The problem that upset Luther, that terrorized him before he found his justification in faith, his passionate anxiety, also upset and frightened a lot of other people and made them listen to Luther when he found a solution to his own problems and offered it as a solution to their problems—a way to achieve salvation, which as Albrecht Durer the painter put it, opened up new worlds.

Another evidence of contemporary religious concern is late Gothic art of a flamboyant style that showed off for all to see just how much money and how much art men would invest in the palaces of God. But the age of flamboyant Gothic is also an age of flamboyant piety. This was the time when we begin to get images of the suffering Christ, and images of the heart surrounded with thorns which would be followed by the future cult of the Sacred Heart, and fraternities of the passion that still survive today in Central and South America and in Spain. There was also the devotion of the rosary, which is a way of praying and honoring the Virgin by reciting one hundred fifty “Hail Marys,” and a whole host of other practices glorifying the Lady who appeared more and more like the channel of the grace her divine Son provided for men. And from the Virgin, one moved back to her mother, Saint Anne, whose great vogue came at the turn of the fifteenth century and beyond with the growth of the theory of Immaculate Conception first of the Virgin then also of her mother. Even Erasmus wrote that he had been devoured with piety for her since his tenderest youth. This, incidentally, was also a time when many male babies as well as female were baptized Anne, such as the French Duke and Marshall Anne de Montmorency. It was also a great time for pilgrimages, with Venice fostering a whole new industry of pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Law courts sometimes sentenced the guilty party to a pilgrimage to one or another sanctuary, where today they would inflect a fine. Along with this, there was an entire cult of relics, various objects from the lives of the saints, even parts of their bodies. At the same time the Church was printing up indulgences and bringing out hundreds of writings first for the priests then for the public translated from Latin or written directly in French, German, English for the middling bourgeoisie which ignored Latin, and for those pious women who could read. If we look at contemporary art, we can hardly find a Flemish painting without a pious image pinned to the wall. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, more and more, God and the saints operate very close to the human plane and the new naturalism of the artists reflects a growing familiarity or desire for familiarity between the worshiper and the worshiped. This was a period in which the plastic arts provided the imagination with a vision of a very human Christ, and above all a very humane one, infinitely pitiful and suffering and good; very close to men and women who could recognize their own image on the panels and the paintings which, once upon a time, bore images of idealized and superior figures. A very human Christ, a very human Virgin Mary, a vast family of saints.

Altogether then, there was no sense in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that the springs of faith were drying up. There was no loss of interest in religion, no hostility to the old practices. On the contrary, the impression on gets is of a lot of piety and a great appetite for the divine with a great variety of expression. And yet, as far as one can tell, there was also a sense of unease, a discomfort, a certain vague aspiration towards something else. And it came from that new class that had been moving up, not only in riches but also in influence and status. And these were the people who manufactured and traded and practiced law in the growing urban centers. The city burghers whom we now describe as the bourgeoisie. In our next program we shall see how their concerns and their interests were going to shake the Western world. Until then . . .

#128 The Rise of the Middle Classes

Reformation, reaction, new dogmatisms, new pragmatisms; Europe stirred, especially its cities. Printing spread new ideas, and artists turned to secular subjects and everyday life.

The Rise of the Middle Classes this time on The Western Tradition.
And now UCLA Professor Eugene Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time we began to explore the great religious and political changes of the sixteenth century, which went hand in hand with the urban activities and the rise of urban social groups that nowadays we describe as bourgeois. Now these burghers were not for the most part unscrupulous adventurers, fortune hunters, nouveau riche who had popped up out of nothing, through their rackets, through their speculations. There were some of those, of course, but on the whole the bourgeois were not solely concerned with gain. Many of them got on by hard and patient labor, and many had a kind of seriousness, a need and respect for morality and for knowledge that made them accumulate books about the lives of the saints in their libraries, that made them devote half their wills to invocations to God and to the saints and bequests to pious causes and even sometimes it led them to retire at an early age and devote their time to study and prayer.

The bourgeois were also realists in a hard world, but their realism did not exclude a strong sense of duty and a strong need of religious certainty and comfort. The question, then, became what kind of certainty, because as the medieval order collapsed, the old certainties did not suffice anymore. Remember that the bourgeoisie were merchants, traders, travelers, who saw and compared a lot of people and a lot of places and who drew from this experience a sense of relativity, of relative values. And because they dealt in quantity, and money and material things, they also developed a sense of precision, of exactness; above all perhaps, of practical solutions. They read the ancients and drew from them the idea of a religion that was clear and reasonable and reasonably human. Now what kind of religion did the official Church have to offer? Simple folk had their saints and hellfire. More educated people were offered church services that were either perfunctory, purely formalistic, and when they looked beyond they found theologians who wrote books for other theologians. This was part of the trouble, in some ways, the Protestant Reformation was less a revolt against corruption than against cliquishness and condescension. The basic argument of the theologians was that dogma was beyond the grasp of reason and therefore the faithful should accept this fact and accept the dogma without trying to understand it. There was a dryness here, a drought of the spirit, that the reformers rose against as much as they rose against the superstitions fed to the masses. When Luther said, "Juristin boese Christin," lawmen are bad Christians, he was talking about a kind of religious sterility in the church, formalized and legalized. This was not the kind of theology that was suited to the new men of the cities who grew in number and importance, who developed a new group consciousness, and who developed a taste for clarity and lucidity by reading the ancients and by reading humanists like Erasmus. So there was bound to be a clash between the aspirations of the bourgeois which wanted to reconcile its action and its faith and the status quo of an anachronistic church.

Now I don't want to make my explanation too narrow, no single interpretation could ever be valued, and there is no exclusive relation between the Reformation and the rise of the bourgeoisie. For one thing, the sixteenth century bourgeoisie were not the dominant social group they became in the nineteenth century; peasants and nobles were also spiritually ill at ease and discontented. But the Church had always to contend with heretics or potential heretics, most of them concerned with bringing people closer to salvation and to God. It had always managed to handle these heretics by absorbing them or by burning them, and this time the Church had lost its touch, and if that happened it was at least partly connected with this burgher-related spirit that I described.

The gap between the Church and the bourgeoisie grew wider every day the more so because most of the clergy especially the theologians didn't know and didn't much care about the concerns of their time. They lived among themselves, they closed their eyes to everything but internal Church affairs. And even those clergy who realized that the Church did need to change, thought that they could save religion simply by reforming the clergy and the Church machinery, a kind of "party purge," improve the education of the clergy, reform its discipline and everything would be okay.

Perhaps the clergy were right, but I think they missed the point of the issue. The point on which the Reformation struggle really seems to have started, which is the issue of authority. The old men and the establishment in general envisioned reform as merely making adjustments to the repository of authority, the clergy, and they thought that this would be sufficient. The new men, however, wanted them to demonstrate the right and the nature of authority itself. This was the basic difference out of which the Reformation came and the Reformation essentially offered the bourgeois two things above all others that the Church had not done. One, that the Bible be written not in Latin but in the vulgar tongue so that everybody could read it. And two, the idea of Justification by Faith, the idea that faith alone justifies and saves the believer, not the myriad rituals and practices that lay at the core of the Church.
These ideas were not plucked out of the air by Martin Luther in 1517, or by John Calvin, the French theologian and reformer who was banished from Paris in 1528 for his Protestant teachings. The ideas had been there before, in a mood, in a widespread yearning. These, in turn, led to new translations of the Bible in the vernacular which were then placed in the hands of the faithful without cuts, or reservations, or previous censorship by some body of official interpreters, and this gave the people of the time two novelties. First, a living human God, and second a radical transformation of the whole notion of the priesthood. People wanted to get nearer to God, nearer to Christ, but they felt that they were being held off, kept away for lack of an opportunity to engage in a direct dialogue between the believer and his redeemer. This direct dialogue would be facilitated, however, if the Bible was written in your own language so you could read it yourself in your own home, but that would make it a dialogue from which the priest was henceforth absent, or at least subordinated, unwanted, sometimes even resented. The fact is that more and more these burghees who raised themselves to the top by personal effort by their own merits and gifts, who fought for advancement and achieved successes that they knew they owned only to themselves. These men did not want priestly mediation or intercession. They were still deferential to their social or spiritual betters, but they had a new pride and a new sense of responsibility which encouraged them to question most authorities except the very highest.

Another development arising from the bourgeois spirit of the time was the new glorification of manual labor, and this too affected the new men's attitude towards the Church. For hundreds and thousands of years, the ideal of man had been a sort of unproductive idleness to be abandoned only for destructive, or formal, or ritual purposes. Most people earned their living by the sweat of their brow, but that's because they had to; to labor was vulgar; even Christianity which put prayer and meditation above work and the other pursuits of the world, even Christianity emplaced this view. But in the sixteenth century, Catholics like Rabelais, and Protestants like Calvin, began to sing another tune and the lyrics said, "he who doesn't work doesn't deserve to eat." They saw very little piety in the useless lives of monks who prayed but didn't contribute anything concrete to the welfare of their fellow men, and so now monks and priests were envisaged as parasites avoiding the responsibilities of the world and doing nobody any good least of all themselves. Moreover, you don't need monks and priests if you have your Bible and you can read it you've got eternal God on one hand, and you the believer on the other, who can receive God's message without any intermediary who can capture this message directly through the scriptures which are quite literally the word of God. There is a profound and subversive logic in Martin Luther who translated the Bible into this German edition and who asserted every Christian is a priest, every believer is his own priest.

The other very important gift the Reformation furnished to the bourgeoisie was the idea that faith alone justifies and saves the believer, and the thing to realize here is that the formula of Justification by Faith for which so many people accepted persecution and death was not so much a theological formula as a psychological formula. It offered two things: first of all, it attacked the prevalent Catholic mystique of justification by works, not just good works, like founding charities; not just payment, but also personal mortification, the punishment of the body, the rejection of active life and so on. Now this entire value of which we have seen triumph with the rise of Christianity and the monasticism after Mediterranean civilization collapsed ten or twelve centuries before. This was now rejected by the Reformation in a radical reevaluation of life, the world, the body, and by a reevaluation of activities in all these spheres, activity to the greater glory of God of course, but also to the glory and use of the things that God created which should not be scorned or set aside too lightly. And even when some Protestants became Puritans, tending to renounce or to reject the pleasures of life and of the flesh, a stance which came rather close to a certain Catholic tradition of sainthood. The Puritan still represented a different personality type. Catholics and Protestants might still agree that the world was a terrible place and all that counted was salvation, but Catholics in general prefer to be reassured by a paternalistic Church that offered access or at least intercession for salvation, whereas Protestants insisted that you had to forge your own salvation, you have to make it on your own. And you can see how this fitted perfectly with the new urban spirit of enterprise and pragmatism.

Justification by Faith also abolished the terrible fear that you might die unshriven, unabsolved by a priest of all the sins that imperiled your salvation, and it abolished the cult of the dead, all the prayers and practices that had lain at the heart of Christian sensibility as also many other religions. So in the new Protestant societies the endowed masses and charities and all the activities and monuments that had funneled money away from secular consumption and secular investment, all these came to an end. The house of the Lord shed its splendors for sobriety--the soberness that fits the sober, serious temper of burghees and bankers and scholars who admired Luther for daring to stand up before the emperor himself and to insist on his right to obey his own judgment and his own conscience. After all, the bourgeois also wanted to assert their freedom of conscience, their independence and reformers like Luther encouraged this. They told the Christian to do his business with God directly without the mediation of priests, to forget saints and relics and any kind of interference in the crucial business of salvation, to open his Bible and read for himself without a priestly interpreter. And in all this printing was a crucial factor because it provided the Bibles for
new moral Christians and because it also made the visual propaganda of paintings and sculptures in church seem unnecessary, superfluous. Protestants could afford to be iconoclasts because they were people of "The Book" and Protestantism was a religion of "The Book," so the visual arts of Protestants were going to focus not on religious subjects but on secular ones--on everyday life, on landscapes, on portraits. This is a portrait, a self-portrait, of Hieronymus Bosch, a mystical and moralistic painter who died just before Luther nailed his thesis to the Wittenberg chapel door. The paintings of Bosch are eerie; they are like grotesque hallucinations, nightmares of temptation, the fall, and punishment in and beyond a profoundly corrupt world. There is no room in Bosch's works for normal untroubled people, or at least his extraordinary ordinary people exist only in terms of spiritual categories like temptation, damnation, salvation. By the time of Pieter Brueghel who lived from 1525 to 1569 and who was a younger contemporary of John Calvin, things had changed quite radically. Brueghel's paintings are mostly landscapes or scenes of peasant life. Brueghel was influenced by Bosch as most northern painters were at that time, but Brueghel was a humanist. He was didactic, moralizing, and often grotesque; but where Bosch was catastrophic, Brueghel was satirical. He was as Christian as Bosch and he was passionate in his own way but his religious ideas were common sense ideas, rational and ethical. He denounced avarice and greed, he ridiculed pretentiousness, and he parodied ceremonies including religious ceremonies. Brueghel was interested in nature and in real people; indeed, in very ordinary people--peasants and the poor who hardly ever attracted anybody's attention before. He did not sweeten, or glorify, or poetize these people but painted them warts and all which really made him the first modern painter and an example of the forces at work in these times.

On the other hand, it's interesting to note that Brueghel's major patron was a cardinal and the Catholic Hapsburg princes who governed Belgium for Philip II so admired Brueghel's work that the best place to see his paintings today is the court museum in Vienna. Even so, we know that on his death bed, Brueghel told his wife to burn all of his remaining paintings lest she should get into trouble. So even an artist with high protectors had reason to worry, and we have to bear this in mind when we think of the Catholic counteroffensive, the Counter-Reformation, which set out to clean and reform the Church as well as fight and defeat the Protestant enemy.

Beginning in 1545, a Church council, the Council of Trent, reaffirmed the authority of the Church of tradition and of the Church hierarchy. The Inquisition, the special tribunal for identifying and punishing heresy, was also refurbished, and the first thing it did was to attack on the printing front. The first Index of prohibited books appeared in 1559, books better burned than read, and there would be a catechism, a book of questions and answers outlining principals of right belief for all Catholic Christians, and there would be an approved Bible, The Vulgate, written in Latin. There was also the new society of Jesus founded by a Spanish knight, Ignatius Loyola, who lived from 1491-1556. Loyola was fascinated by chivalric ideals and treated the service of God as a kind of holy knighthood.

The Jesuit was a up-to-date version of the Christian athlete highly trained on the intellectual plane as well as on the spiritual. Flexible, adaptable, disciplined and self-disciplined, literate, cultivated, subject to a strong central authority, the Jesuits were ready to compete with Protestant enterprise on the educational front, in missionary enterprise, and religious fervor. And their achievements in all these roles were going to be quite remarkable. So the Counter-Reformation was a very powerful force and the battle lines were drawn, but from this point on, there was going to be choice within Western culture. There was going to be competition. There were going to be battles of books as well as of soldiers. Three of the great elements of modern Western civilization--gunpowder, printing and the Protestant religion had come together. We shall see just how explosive the mixture could be in the programs to come.

#129 The Wars of Religion

It was Catholic against Protestant, dynasty against dynasty, people against people, in the age of the Reformation. Civil war, foreign war, engulfed nearly every power in Europe until the interests of the state triumphed over the interests of faith.

The Wars of Religion this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Edward Gibbon, the great English historian who died two hundred years ago, called history "the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind." Of all of these, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gather espe-
cially rich harvests. The Protestant Reformation opened a Pandora’s box of international and civil conflicts that we call wars of religion—wars of religion because religion was either their cause or their excuse. Central and Northern Europe, England and Scotland and France, all of them found themselves involved in wars with one another or else in internal struggles with Protestant against Catholic, Catholic against Protestant, sometimes Protestant against Protestant and Catholic against Catholic.

Behind the religious issue, however, there stood other crucial interests: rival dynasties like those that ruled in France or Spain; rival social orders; peasants against lords in Germany—cities against their overlords in the Netherlands—princes against the emperor in Germany, nobles against the crown in England, in France. But these political struggles were more fierce because the opposition of faiths introduced a complicating factor. Few men could be crueler than would-be martyrs who have escaped the executioner’s axe.

By the 1530s, the Cantons of Switzerland had fought a bloody civil war and settled into a division between Protestant and Catholic Cantons which still endures today. And in 1555, the German states ended an entire generation of religious conflict by signing the Peace of Augsburg. As in Switzerland, this was simply an agreement to disagree and to localize the conflict as far as possible. The Peace of Augsburg was no more lasting than any other peace. It kept a sort of truce for half a century, but its importance lay in the formula on which it was based—cuius regio, eius religio, the religion of the ruler shall be the religion of his subjects. So unity in religion had become an element in the unity of the state. Everybody in one state must belong to the same church or get out. And this replaced the universal Christian Church of the Middle Ages with a model of national conformity and international diversity. But just as central Europe got a breathing space, western Europe began to get into trouble.

In England, in 1535, King Henry VIII broke with Rome because he wanted a divorce from his wife who hadn’t produced a male heir. But the pope wouldn’t approve the divorce, so in the Reformation settlement, Henry set up his own national church, the Church of England. He became the first sovereign prince to take over the Roman Church, subject it openly and totally to the state, and use its property to strengthen the crown and the crown’s supporters.

This Reformation settlement remained uncertain for a hundred fifty years, and it contributed to much insecurity in England. But Henry’s second daughter, Queen Elizabeth I, who was crowned in 1558, helped to stabilize the situation by introducing a new idea—tolerance in return for payment. You were allowed to worship in your own way, but you had to do it in private and you had to pay for it, because it was a privilege to be different from everybody else. Elizabeth and her successors didn’t really trust the Catholics, not because they had a different faith but because their faith made some of them function as a fifth column of England’s Catholic enemies, especially Spain. So Elizabeth kept her eye on them and she fined them, but she also gave up the attempt to secure uniformity by force and she made a virtue from necessity, or at least a profit.

Meanwhile, trouble was brewing in France and in the Netherlands. Political problems and religious problems there produced an explosive mixture which blew up in the 1560s and 1570s. It led to an almost endless series of wars for the rest of the century, with French fighting French, Belgians fighting the Dutch, the English helping the Protestants both in Holland and in France, and the Spaniards fighting everybody at one time or another.

Catholic France had been burning Protestant reformers since the 1520s, but Protestantism also attracted quite a number of French nobles who found it a convenient stalking horse against the crown, which had been getting stronger at their expense. French Protestants were called Huguenots, from the German term for confederates, and politically they often represented a feudal reaction against the encroaching centralized state.

But Catholicism was popular in France, and the Catholic party had the advantage of Spanish subsidies, so the civil war dragged on, marked by small battles and big massacres. The most famous massacre took place on St. Bartholomew’s Night, in August 1572, and on the following day, killing several thousand Protestants in Paris and the Provinces. The pope, when he heard the news, ordered a Te Deum, a hymn of praise, and declared that the massacre pleased him more than fifty victories against the Turks.

Philip II of Spain also rejoiced. It’s said that this was the only time in his life when he laughed. Not all the power of Philip, however, could prevent the Protestants of the Netherlands from freeing themselves from Spanish Catholic rule. Under the leadership of William of Orange, they separated from the southern Belgian provinces which remained Catholic, and set up a new free state called the United Provinces, also known as Holland, from the name of the biggest and richest of these provinces.
Having lost a good chunk of the Netherlands, Philip now tried to find compensation by winning greater influence in France, perhaps by getting control of France as the protector of the Catholic party there. But with all the help he gave the French Catholics, Philip could not prevent a Huguenot prince from succeeding to the French throne: Henry of Bourbon, Prince of Bearn in the Pyrenees, who was next in line of succession. There was more civil war in France, and it devastated the country. It came to an end only when Henry decided to become a Catholic, declaring that Paris was worth a Mass. Conversion seemed to be the only way to secure unity for France and to get the crown for himself, and it worked.

In 1594, Henry entered Paris, which had resisted him as long as he remained a Huguenot. He was crowned as Henry IV and he united both Catholics and Huguenots against the Spanish enemy, and after another three years of war, he forced the Spaniards to make peace. But Henry's biggest task was to establish peace inside France. On the same day that the peace with Spain was signed, May 2, 1598, he promulgated the famous Edict of Nantes, named after the city where it was signed. This was to serve as the base of religious peace in France until Louis XIV revoked it about a century later.

The Edict succeeded because it made the Catholics feel they had won and it made the Huguenots feel secure, since they were allowed to worship in their own fashion. And for the next one hundred years, the Huguenots were going to contribute much that was vital and worthwhile to France's economy, its politics and its culture.

Now if I may leave the Huguenots busy contributing, I want to say a few things about one of the most important results of this series of conflicts—conflicts which, you realize, were mainly civil wars. They were internal struggles in which religious dissension threatened again and again to tear a country apart, to destroy political and social unity for the sake of religious unity and belief, to undermine the power of the state and the welfare of society for the sake of the church, and to massacre great numbers of people for the greater glory of God. Not surprisingly, there was a reaction to this bloody waste, a reaction most clearly reflected in the appearance of a point of view eventually of a group of men known as the Politiques. And "Politiques" is a term that I might best define as "sagacious, prudent men interested in government that works," and the rise and the influence of the Politiques toward the end of the sixteenth century was really the most notable sign of the times. The very fact that Politiques existed, testified to the fact that for a lot of people, the religion of the state, the state as a symbol of order and stability; this was starting to look more important than the religion of the church, or alternately you might say that religion was becoming more individual, more of a private affair, while the civil secular state power was recognized as having more immediate claims, more pressing claims, than those of the church.

In the great crisis of the Reformation, religious people had felt that everything had to give way to the interests of religion; but now the Politiques felt that everything had to give way to the interests of the state, and the most important of these interests, given the terrible effect of civil war, was national unity. And if toleration of other religions was necessary to keep the country together, then, all right, they would be tolerant. Now this was something new. Truth has always appeared indivisible. You cannot allow untruth to survive. You cannot be neutral between good and evil. Martin Luther, after he had sown his wild oats, neither desired nor believed in tolerance. John Calvin never dreamt about it. You were either a persecutor or else persecuted, and there was nothing the persecuted liked so much as becoming persecutors.

But for the Politiques and for Princes like Henry IV, tolerance was an instrument of state. They didn't say that persecution was always wrong; they just said that tolerance was sometimes right. Their attitude was, "let's see if it works." After all, it did not look as if either the French Protestants or Catholics were really strong enough to beat the other into submission, so you find a gradual development of the view that you cannot identify loyalty with orthodoxy—that in Catholic France, a man could be a Protestant and a good Frenchman, too.

A similar attitude developed in Protestant England where Queen Elizabeth and her ministers were much more interested in the welfare of the country than in what language they were going to hear religious services. There was persecution of Catholics in England, but they were not persecuted because they were Catholic, but because they wanted to undermine the queen and the constitution of the country. A Catholic could be a Catholic as long as he stayed at home and did not conspire against the Queen, which is much the same idea as lay behind the Edict of Nantes. You can see how novel this was by contrasting it to the Spanish Inquisition, which was established a century earlier in 1479. The Inquisition did not just want to get rid of a heretic because he was a danger to society, it was interested in his soul. It might have to torture him into salvation, but it would do its best to save him, even in spite of himself.
The Politiques, however, didn't care about a man's soul. They only cared about his power or his nuisance value, and they were prepared to come to terms with reality provided they could get practical results—that is, the unity, stability, security of the state. And to further these interests, they were ready to ignore the interests or the orders of the church, any church. They were ready to ignore the church for the sake of the nation. So the wars of religion paradoxically led to a downgrading of the importance of religion. It dwindled into one department of life; it became a private matter, not immediately but gradually, until in the nineteenth century, we find a Victorian politician remarking that things have come to a pretty pass if religion is going to interfere with private life, and this is an idea which no medieval man could possibly have entertained or understood.

Still the so-called wars of religion were not over yet. The greatest of them, and the last, was going to be the Thirty Years' War from 1618 to 1648. This drew in almost every power in Europe—Swedes and Danes, Germans, Bohemians, Spaniards, and Frenchmen. It started when Ferdinand of Bohemia ascended the throne in 1617, determined to restore his lands to Catholicism and to revoke the religious freedoms of Bohemian Protestants. Within a few years, the conflict escalated into international war. Armies, as usual, did more harm to the civilian population than to each other, but things got so bad that even the soldiers suffered, as you can see in these engravings by the French artist, Jacques Colomb. William Harvey, the English physician, the same man who discovered the circulation of the blood, traveled across central Europe during the war and noted that "by the way, we could scarcely see a dog, crow, kite, raven, or any bird or anything to anatomize, only some few miserable people, the relics of the war, and the plague where famine had made anatomies before I came." As the great English poet, Milton, asked, "what can war but endless wars still breed?" The only hope in this sort of situation is exhaustion. And by 1648, everybody was exhausted. It had been the worst catastrophe in central Europe since the Black Death of the fourteenth century. The fighting finally came to an end with the Treaty of Westphalia, which reasserted the right of each ruler to determine his land's religion. It confirmed the territorial sovereignty of Germany's many principalities, which would serve to perpetuate German division and political weakness; it confirmed the position of France as a great European power; and it confirmed the decline of Spain.

But the treaty also made clear the declining importance of religion. Although the Thirty Years' War started out Catholic against Protestant, it ended with two chief contenders, both of whom were Catholic: France and Spain. Catholic had fought Catholic; Protestant had fought Protestant, according to national or dynastic interests; and so the last war of religion was also the first, ultimately, to ignore religion. The fighting, the misery, the suffering, had dulled religious sensibilities; and besides, after 1648 Catholic and Protestant positions were pretty much stabilized anyway.

If you look at the map, you can also see a curious coincidence. On the whole, the territory of the old Roman Empire stays Roman Catholic; the barbarian lands beyond the border of Rome are Protestant—which suggests how profoundly some structures can affect culture over the centuries. There are exceptions to this pattern, of course, but the general lines are clear. Equally clear to contemporaries was the fact that the great mass of people would eventually accept whatever was given or imposed by their rulers, including religion. They might rebel at times, but it was usually about bread or taxes, not higher principles. Material reality and their precarious existence weighed too heavily upon them. Their horizons were narrow, their submission traditional, and this worked in favor of the established authority, whatever its creed or its political color. The people were there to be used and manipulated by a tiny political class, and would remain so for a very long time.

In a later program we shall see the further evolution of established authority into the absolute monarchies of the seventeenth century; but even as the dynastic states were coming into their own, a greater novelty was taking shape, the republican patriotism of the United Provinces of Holland, which had cast off Spanish rule. So from this point on, patriotism did not have to identify with a dynasty. It could identify with a free community that described itself as a Res Publica, which literally means the "common thing," or the "common good," or, as the English called it, the "commonwealth."

The Dutch set up the first modern commonwealth in the sixteenth century and the English tried to imitate them in the seventeenth century; and these fragile models founded on the ideal of citizen freedom and citizen wealth or well being were particularly important for the Western tradition, because they foretold the republics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including our own republic. And equally significant was their growth out of and around cities, the direct successors of medieval city-states and the centers of new and vital economic activity. We shall take a closer look at this phenomenon next time, because while wars and politics are important, there are also less obvious forces at work that affect the outcome of wars and that affect how most people live; and these are economic forces, whose base in the modern world is in urban society, as we shall see in our next program when we leave the path of armies and princes and follow the path of money instead.
Money, trade, profits, enterprise—without them, the machinery of the state could not have turned, and most of that money was made here—in places like Venice, Antwerp, Amsterdam, where freedom was prized and our modern world was born.

_The Rise of the Trading Cities_ this time on _The Western Tradition._

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time, we looked at some of the political and religious factors at work in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and if you remember, we even saw a graphic example of how the long experience of Roman rule a thousand years before was still impressed upon the face of Europe in the location of Roman Catholic states. Today, I would like to suggest another basic structure, which is not political, not religious, but geographic and economic.

Back in 843, the three grandsons of Charlemagne signed a treaty that divided the empire between them and the Treaty of Verdun gave one brother the West, which we now call France, and another the East, more or less Germany. But the older brother, who got the imperial crown, got a long strip of land running from the Low Countries to Italy, and because his name was Lothair, this land was named Lotharingia.

Lotharingia looks terribly artificial for a state, and impossible to defend; and in fact it didn't last very long. But if you look again, you'll see that it reflects a geographical and economic reality. It runs from the North Sea to the Mediterranean, and it includes the major economic centers and the main lines of communication between them—the Rhine, the Alpine passes, and of course, Italy—and in the twentieth century it becomes the spinal cord of the European economy, so keep your eyes on it.

Now, when European trade revived in the Middle Ages, that revival was anchored at the two ends of what was once Lothair's realm, the Low Countries, and Italy—especially Italy, where one great business and manufacturing center was Florence, here. Between the two ends, then as now, stretched the axis of European commerce. Around the Alpine passes and along the Rhine, trading towns grew up or were reborn, like Cologne, and the rest of trade revolved around that axis. In the North was a league of German cities called the Hansa—Riga, Danzig, and this one, Lübeck—mostly along the Baltic and connecting with Scandinavia, Poland and Russia. In the center were Champagne, with its fairs, where merchants from north and south could meet about halfway; Lyon, between the Rhone and the Alps; and Augsburg, between the Danube and the Rhine, and also close to the Alps. But the real wealth of the Middle Ages was at the gateways: Venice, on which the Mediterranean trade was focused; and Bruges, on which the Baltic and North Sea trade was focused.

In the sixteenth century, however, Venice began to decline. She was no longer mistress of the Mediterranean because of the Turks, and she was no longer mistress of the spice trade because of the Portuguese. With the Age of Discovery, the Atlantic had taken over from the Mediterranean. As for Bruges, its harbor was silted up, and the shipping that normally would have gone to her shifted next door to Antwerp. The Portuguese took their spices to Antwerp, and the heavy goods from the Baltic also went there—grain, lumber and herring, a crucial fish when there were two fast days a week plus Lent. But then Antwerp declined as well, ruined by the wars of religion, and the wealth, and the power that went with the wealth, shifted to another North Sea port a bit up the coast—Amsterdam.

Of course, this is a very schematic and superficial account of developments that took four centuries, roughly from 1200 to 1600. But what it helps to make clear is that all this time, and increasingly so, production, exchange, capital, wealth, credit, were not at the courts of princes, but in these trading centers. Without their loans, without their other financial services, the princes couldn't operate; they especially couldn't make war, which was their chief occupation. And so, while dynastic states made war, city-states make profits.

The cities also created basic instruments and institutions which were going to affect our culture considerably. For instance, fourteenth century Venice concentrated merchants and bankers and money changers, often the same person, not just in one town but in one small area near the Rialto Bridge. They could transfer goods and money from one another by simple bookkeeping. Payments could be transferred without the use of cash, without waiting for a fair. Overdrafts were possible, credit notes appeared, and so did something like a stock exchange. These meetings on the Rialto fixed commodity prices, they fixed interest rates on public and private loans, and then they fixed premiums for marine insurance. Just around the corner from the Rialto was the _Calle delle Securita_, Insurance Street, and so in fourteenth century Venice, big business was already concentrated, and it worked in ways.
we can recognize today. All this high finance went on in the open air. In London, which was a backward, unsophisticated place, the Italians got together in Lombard Street, where the Bank of England stands today, "walking in the rain when it raineth, more like peddlers than merchants," a contemporary noted. To save themselves from getting wet, traders began to build loggias--arcs--not just in Italy but also in the North. This one is in Amsterdam. At Bruges, they built one on a square known as the Bourseplatz, so "bourse," or "bourse," which also means "purse," is what a stock exchange is called in most European languages.

The characteristic of a trading city was that it was cosmopolitan and that it was tolerant. When Amsterdam built a new town hall, the major statue on it was of Atlas lifting up the globe with all the nations of the world offering their goods to an allegorical Amsterdam. So while Protestant and Catholic fought in Europe and overseas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they still traded in Antwerp, in Amsterdam, or wherever the trading was good. Great ports were described as a "Tower of Babel" or a "Noah's Ark." They wouldn't have been great if their population and their visitors hadn't been able to coexist and to work in peace.

One thing this meant--was city government strong enough to impose security and order. Streets were better patrolled in Antwerp than in Paris, and brawls were put down fast. Order was enforced by the guard, and the guard companies of citizen volunteers were part of the city hierarchy and also part of its sociability. It's one of these guard companies in Amsterdam that Rembrandt captured in his painting, "The Night Watch," and there were many other depictions of guards and guilds which were very different from what you found in more aristocratic societies. In seventeenth century Amsterdam, widows and orphans were placed in orphanages and almshouses and set to spinning wool. The deserving poor got free food and fuel. The orphanage got the profit from garbage, which was collected and sold as field manure. And we're told that even the cats were organized with an office where at certain hours of the day a great number of cats are fed, which afterward hunt among the stores for mice and rats.

Still, cats and beggars weren't the first priority--making money was, and big business had as many grand designs as nation-states did. One such design was the creation of joint stock companies to trade in the Indies, and an East India Company was set up in London in 1600, then another in Amsterdam two years later, and similar companies initiated them in other countries. These companies traded as single units, dividing their profits among stockholders who could buy or sell their shares in the exchange, and dividends were as high as thirty percent a year. Now today we find stock exchanges, stock companies commonplace; but in those days it all had to be invented, and it was exceptional. Equally exceptional was the first public bank, the Bank of Amsterdam, set up in 1610, a bank that attracted so many depositors, so many investors, that the Dutch could always borrow money at two or three percent less than any competitor, and this gave them a great advantage in business and in war.

There is a story about an East India Company man talking to the Sultan of Java and suggesting that the Sultan encourage his people to trade, to become richer, to pay taxes and so on. And the Sultan replies, "My people, unlike yours, have nothing they can call their own. Everything they have belongs to me." Now, that sort of people might produce a surplus if forced, but not much of one.

But if the first priority of the cities was making money, the second was freedom--not freedom for its own sake, but freedom to go about your business and do more or less as you please, as long as you don't trouble the public order. This miracle of tolerance was found wherever trade was dominant. In seventeenth century Amsterdam, the Calvinist pastors preached against prostitutes and Jews, but the city council ignored them. It tolerated Jews and dissenters as it tolerated Catholics, not because of any ideal but because tolerance brought in trade and talent and capital.

There was another aspect of the new cities that was modern, and that was their element of show. In a world where entertainment was rare and costly, the streets and markets were a show in themselves. The public buildings were something to see, and so were the monuments and even the art collections in private houses which you could usually visit for a tip. Visitors meant income for local inns, taverns, and tradesmen; so on one hand, cities wanted to show off, on the other, they wanted to provide facilities that were pleasing to their citizens and attractive to outsiders--not just public monuments; better streets, public gardens, public walks. Amsterdam impressed everyone by how neat and clean it was, partly because it allowed few horses and fewer carriages. Rome, whose major industry was pilgrims, paid a lot of attention to show, if not to cleanliness, in its great churches and splendid monuments. In the feasts and diversions, the plays, banquets, shops and facilities catering to a population of tourists and pilgrims and priests, perhaps the most cosmopolitan population in Europe.

In the refectory of the Jesuit College, you could hear twenty-seven languages spoken. In Saint Peter's Cathedral, you could make your confession in almost any language. Just as important, if you went down to the
market in the Piazza Navrona when there wasn't a bullfight or a special race, you could see jugglers, tightrope walkers, performing animals, you name it, at any time; and you didn't even have to pay to watch.

Rome didn't even mind Protestant tourists, even at the height of the Counter-Reformation. And this is proof that other interests can be as strong as religious interests. Reality is seldom black or white. Seventeenth-century Catholic Rome was permissive and nonconformist and probably more open to free speech than anywhere except Amsterdam. Some popes were repressive and the Inquisition carried on, but the popular mood was broad-minded because it was in the popular interest to be broad-minded.

Just because they had so much in common at one level, it's instructive to compare Rome with Amsterdam. Amsterdam turned on trade; everything was focused on that; there were no monasteries, no cathedral, no castles, no university, and the churches were rather inconspicuous. The houses didn't try to proclaim or reflect the wealth of their owners; they were built more for comfort than for show. There was none of the grandeur of Rome or the glamour of Venice. There were canals, and trees along the cays, and things were orderly, so minds and capital and energies could concentrate on making money, not on spending it.

Rome was quite different. The 1600s were the great age of the Baroque, a style whose name derives from the Portuguese word for "irregular," which the Portuguese applied to imperfectly shaped pearls. Baroque is dramatic, grand, full of movement and emotion, perfectly suited to express the theatrical tensions of the Counter-Reformation and its desire to impress. Baroque architecture reasserts authority by gigantic productions and dazzlements. It enlists stage design to political ends, and you can see this spirit best, perhaps, in the work of Bernini or in that of Rubens in Catholic Flanders, with his mythologies and allegories and acres of sumptuous flesh. They're just the opposite of the unassuming realism of a seventeenth-century Dutch painters like Paul Potter or the quiet lack of artifice you get in a painting by Vermeer, incredibly luminous yet perfectly realistic. From this you feel certain that it isn't the grand who will inherit the earth, but the simple; or at least I like to think so.

The towering figures of seventeenth century science were men of modest origins. Galileo was the son of a musician; Newton was the son of a yeoman farmer, and the two are linked by the fact that Newton was born in the same year that Galileo died. But they have more in common, because the junction of Newton's mathematical genius and Galileo's mechanical genius created a scientific revolution. Essentially, Galileo's telescopic observations and mathematical calculations extended the bounds of the visible universe so that he was able to justify celestial phenomena and terrestrial ones into one theory subject to the same laws--the laws of mechanics.

Newton, you might say, carried Galileo's work to a logical conclusion when he worked out the law of gravity, which he named from the Roman "gravitas," or weightiness, a law which explained the movement of all bodies on earth as in the heavens. Alexander Pope wrote his epitaph: "Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night; God said 'let Newton be;'--and all was light." This age of great and bloody wars of religion, then, was also an age of light, in art, which fascinates the painters from Rembrandt and Vermeer to George de la Tour; but also we have seen inside. The telescope, which Galileo developed, was invented in Holland--so was the microscope.

And it's worth remembering that scientific discovery did not depend on religion. Copernicus, the Polish astronomer who suggested that the earth turns on its axis, and also around the sun; Copernicus was a canon of his cathedral. Kepler, the German who discovered that the earth and other planets travel around the sun in elliptical orbits, was a maverick Lutheran who nevertheless was a high servant of the Holy Roman Emperor, because the Emperor Rudolf didn't care as long as you were a good magician. Galileo, who got into trouble for supporting Copernicus' theory that the planets revolve around the sun, was for a long time a member in good standing of the Church; and Galileo's problem was very serious because he had shown the heavens to be no different from earth. The moon was pockmarked, the sun had spots, and so on and so on. His observations shattered what had been assumed to be a basic difference between Heaven and earth. If heavenly objects were not immutable and perfect, where then was the realm of God? Given the gravity of his transgression, the mere house arrest under which Galileo ended his life, working to the end, seems pretty mild.

Even rationalism wasn't a Protestant monopoly. It was Pope Gregory XIII who, in 1582, promulgated the new, improved calendar that we still use and call the Gregorian calendar. Descartes, the seventeenth century patron saint of rationalism, was a Catholic, too. He coined the famous axiom, "I think, therefore I am," and found it more economical to conform in religion and think about other things. But he also found it more convenient to spend most of his life in Protestant Holland; so there was a difference. A great admirer of Descartes was Baruch Spinoza, who grew up in Amsterdam, the son of Jewish refugees from the Portuguese Inquisition. Spinoza was excommunicated by the Jewish authorities for holding heretical views. Although he made his living by grinding and polishing lenses.
for spectacles, telescopes, microscopes, what he really was interested in was truth--truth about religion, which he wanted to purge of miracles and prophecies; and truth about the state, which he said had a natural and rational foundation. Both were part of the same problem. You had to drive out fear and hatred; you had to bring reason back to earth. Baruch Spinoza was sixteen years old when the Thirty Years' War finally ended.

"As a tree is judged by its fruit," said Spinoza, "so men and institutions should be judged by their actions." Then leave everybody free to think for himself, and judge by their works whether they're pious or not. And the same with politics. No one should be held to live as somebody else wills. No one has the right to force someone else to do what he doesn't want to do. Everyone is the natural-born protector of his own rights. So the Dutch republican experience had clearly colored Spinoza's philosophy, which is a hymn to tolerance, to freedom of thought, to democracy--all very subversive and a precursor of things to come. And this is the point. Protestants were not models of tolerance, and Catholics were not models of oppression. But material and intellectual enterprise came more easily and could be pursued more comfortably in Protestant countries than in Catholic countries, and the most forward-looking, the most challenging creations of the human mind, were going to come first in Holland and then from England, nations of shopkeepers. Next time, the Age of Absolutism. Please join us then.

#131 The Age of Absolutism

It was a crude age--violent, rebellious, disorderly, but slowly it was trained to order, to discipline and self-discipline, and reason--all in the interests of the crown, which became the center of the state, or even the state itself.

The Age of Absolutism this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

The seventeenth century in Europe was the Age of Absolutism, the doctrine and practice of centralized authority and absolute sovereign power represented by the king. Political absolutism was nothing new, of course, but the modern model was a reaction to the disorder of the declining feudal state and the divisions of religious conflict. It was thought that order, peace, tranquility, prosperity, could best be ensured by a central authority against whose will neither the Church, nor feudal lords, nor local traditions could prevail. The simplest argument for monarchical absolutism was that kings derived their authority from God. Now in this version, the divine right of kings to rule permitted them to control not only their subjects, but also, the Church. And so the medieval conflict between secular and spiritual powers was pretty much settled in the seventeenth century in favor of the secular power, even in Catholic countries.

But there were more pragmatic arguments for absolutism which were all about what today we would call law and order. If you wanted law and order, you had to obey a single will like that of Louis XIV. If you didn't do it, you were condemned to chaos--civil war, foreign war, religious war, social war. The theme of civil peace dominated the political thought of the seventeenth century, and most people looked to the monarch to keep the peace. And you can see why this was so important from the example of France. France had a strong, efficient king in Henry IV, but he was murdered in 1610. This left the country in the hands of his widow, Marie de Medicis, who acted as regent for the nine-year-old heir, Louis XIII. Marie was fat and foolish, although she got Reubens to paint her as plump and grand, and the result of her regency was a period in which the country went to the dogs and the power of the crown was threatened. When Louis XIII grew up, he found as his first minister a man of iron and genius, Cardinal Richelieu. With Richelieu at the helm, the nobles were gradually humbled; order was restored; the French Protestants, the Huguenots, who had been acting up, were put in their place; and the prestige of the crown was greater than ever before.

You can see this quite well in Alexander Dumas's novel The Three Musketeers, which is about four noble gentlemen in the Royal Guards Regiment: Artois, Portois, Aramis and D'Artagnan. All of them were likely to pull out their swords and start fighting at the slightest provocation, and even without provocation. The villain of the story is Cardinal Richelieu because he is a man of order; he doesn't appreciate all this mayhem, and he punishes breaches of the peace. Now, if we look at this in context, we find that although Louis XIII and Richelieu appreciated a fine swordsman, they felt they had to repress dueling, just as they had to repress private warfare and castle raiding. So, in the novel, they lightly punish D'Artagnan for fighting in public, and in real life, they cut off the head of a royal duke for disobeying royal edicts against fighting.
On the other hand, they encouraged hunting as an outlet for excess energy. They wanted the nobles to amuse themselves without burning villages and without killing other nobles who could be useful serving in the King's armies. Eventually, royal policies and socioeconomic forces would turn the noble from a dinosaur into a peacock, but not all at once. In the 1640s, after both Louis and Richelieu died, there was another young heir, Louis XIV, who wasn't even five years old; and another regent, his mother Anne of Austria; and another cardinal minister, Cardinal Mazarin. And there was another series of civil wars called the "Frondes," in which the nobles and the great court of law, the Parliament of Paris, tried again to assert their rights against the encroaching power of the crown. That was the last desperate struggle of the nobility to save itself from subordination and decay. They were specialized fighting animals and the new age had no more use for them. The new age wanted producers, businessmen, lawyers, administrators, and bureaucrats. It wanted soldiers, too, of course, and the real-life model of D'Artagnan was going to end his career as commander of the King's Musketeers; but it wanted disciplined soldiers, not Rambo types.

So the nobles were doomed as rivals to the crown, although they put up a desperate fight. Louis XIV was never going to forget the "Frondes"—the rioting in Paris got so bad that on one occasion the ten-year-old king and his mother had to be smuggled out of the city and they spent the night on little bales of straw because there was no other bedding. And Louis never trusted Paris again. He never trusted the nobles either. He found a lot of his ministers among the middle classes. He avoided Paris where he risked being trapped and intimidated. He kept the nobles in their place which was on a kind of golden leash—splendid, idle, and useless. Louis didn't want to destroy the nobles, he only wanted to domesticate them and cut their claws. Once this was done, the nobility was going to be preserved—a lapdog aristocracy incapable of hurting the king any more but providing an impressive facade for the absolute state, an impressive court for the absolute king, and an edifying upper crust for the new "stability through hierarchy" program on which the king based his order and his power.

The nobility revolved around the king, as the planets revolve around the sun—which incidentally is not why Louis is known as the Sun King. That is because his eulogists compared him to Apollo, the sun god; but if he was, himself, the shining sun, until his death in 1715, Louis above all was the center of the state. Indeed, he was the state; hence the famous assertion, L'État c’est moi, "I am the State," which probably was more like L'État c’est moi, meaning "The State is mine." And just because it had taken a lot of hard work and hard fighting to get to this point, the king and the whole apparatus of royal propaganda insisted on hierarchy, order, social discipline, and codes of behavior which you can see reflected in the art, architecture, and literature of the period, as well as in its manners and politics. The epitome of this can be found at Versailles. On the one hand, riches and luxury, a grandiose facade, and a no less grandiose interior. On the other hand, great discipline in the use and arrangement of these riches. The great halls and corridors of Versailles are not at all like the homely hodgepodge of Queen Victoria's drawing rooms. They are more in a style that today we would describe as Prussian. There's something rigid about their grandeur. You can also see it in the gardens of this British Chateau at the Isle of Icon; the builders laid out the vista, they laid out the gardens, they even laid out a forest to surround a canal, all inspired by Versailles as a hundred places from Portugal to Poland were inspired; but the forest has no underbrush, the trees stand in straight rows planted like Indian corn.

But this concern for order was itself the reflection of, and the reaction against, a very disordered time. Remember that the court moved to Versailles from Paris because the king wanted to put some distance between himself and his unruly subjects. And this distance was not only one of space, but also a symbolic distance of quality, a concrete demonstration of grandeur so impressive as to make him unapproachable.

Greatness is only really great if it has about it a quality of the unbelievable, of the marvelous, in the exact sense of that word—arousing wonder, causing astonishment. The king doesn't want to be feared, he wants to be admired. And he wants people to be moved by the spectacle of him in his glory, to the point of worshiping him.

The monarchy and its new order had to establish itself on a myth, but the myth itself had to be based on a sort of fact, on the concrete impression that would make people accept it, and this is where Versailles came in, and where the art of the time came in, as vehicles of new values and new illusions on which the new order could be based. The previous generation of French art in the early seventeenth century had been diverse and lively. Take the work of Jacques Callot, the master etcher who left us an unrivaled record of the horrors of the Thirty Years' War; or that of Philippe de Champagne, cold but full of restrained passion; or the le Nain brothers' strong, realistic pictures of peasants. The le Nain's were so completely pushed aside that no one remembered them until the nineteenth century. Or consider the work of Georges de la Tour, austere but rich and dramatic. La Tour was only rediscovered in 1915. What the king wanted instead was a rigorous, reasonable, cool style, and the ideal was to be found in the paintings of Nicolas Poussin, much admired for their purity. Or else look at Rigaut's painting of Louis himself. They're grand.
all right, but I find them rather stiff and rigid. You can also see the same grand design in architecture. Look at the east front of the Louvre, or at the churches built by Louis's favorite architect, Nicolas Mansart. Now compare them with the works of Bernini in Rome. Roman splendor has fantasy and warmth. French splendor is fashioned by bureaucrats—it's not really human. You can say, with Kenneth Clarke, that it reflects the triumph of the authoritarian state. It also reflects the logical solutions that Louis's finance minister, Colbert, the greatest administrator of the seventeenth century, was trying to impose on every part of public life, and especially on the arts. But we can also find the counterpart of this spirit in the work of Pierre Corneille, a writer whose life from 1605 to 1684 covered most of the period. Corneille's tragedies—these are first editions—suggest how difficult it must have been to harness the violent, disordered passions that threatened the new order, and they also suggest the way in which the harnessing was brought about.

The crucial term in all this is the word "passions." Passions which could threaten institutions like the family or the state, which could harm or hamper great interests, which could spoil important political plans, and which had to be subordinated again and again to a superior duty. If you think that in the world of the three musketeers a silly young blade could start a riot just because of a foolish argument or could enter conspiracies with a foreign enemy just for the sake of a pair of pretty eyes, you can see how important it was to discipline or to downgrade certain kinds of pride or gallantry, which were merely thoughtless satisfactions of the self at the expense of society. And this problem, which was the problem of Richelieu and of Mazarin, was also, in slight disguise, the essential problem of the tragedies of Corneille.

The best known of these tragedies is The Cid, where love has to be subordinated to honor and duty even at the cost of two lovers' happiness. Don Rodrigue is a hero of the Spanish wars against the Moors, and it is the Moors who gave him the nickname of "Cid," from El Said, the leader. Rodrigue loves Chimene, and the two are about to marry when they are caught in a stupid quarrel between their two fathers. Rodrigue is forced to kill Chimene's father in a duel, and after that, family honor forces Chimene to demand the death of the man she loves, and she does this. In the end, however, Rodrigue is not put to death for very pragmatic reasons because the king wants him to fight the Moors.

The Cid is basically an adventure story, a glorified western. But on top of this western, Corneille has built an epic of honor and love. Rodrigue is caught between his father and Chimene, his lady love. Chimene is torn between a legitimate and beautiful love for Rodrigue and the superior passions of honor and vengeance against Rodrigue, the man who killed her father. Although Rodrigue and Chimene loved one another, honor and duty are stronger than passion, or rather the passion for honor is stronger than the passion that we call love. If you fail to sympathize with the dilemma, that just shows how different the twentieth century is from the seventeenth. But remember that Corneille's plays were directed to an aristocracy that couldn't be touched by sermons, by moralizing, by sentimentalism. So he touched them by showing the greatness of self-discipline and self-denial, of not doing what you want but what you should do. And note that Corneille didn't say, as a Christian would, that doing your duty makes you good; he said that doing your duty makes you great.

When Corneille presented the struggle between passion and duty, it wasn't a new invention. What was new in Corneille was that he showed one legitimate passion opposed to another passion that was equally legitimate. It was important to elevate the debate from a contest between right and wrong, to a contest between two rights, because a gentleman who got into a fight could not admit that he was wrong. But if you started by stipulating that his motives were honorable, he would at least stop to consider your arguments, which was what Corneille achieved by raising the debate to a higher plane. And the seventeenth-century people who loved his adventure stories felt vaguely that they were getting in them something they hadn't quite known before—and they were right. They hadn't known it before for the simple reason that it had gone out with the Greeks. Roman thought was too legalistic, Christian thought was too simplistic to tolerate the idea that there could be two rights, that there could be two sides to a conflict. This is a very sophisticated view, and it's fit only for very sophisticated minds, and the tiny minority of the seventeenth century society that read Corneille, that saw Corneille's plays, was hardly very sophisticated; but it was beginning to try, at least.

Where Greek tragedy laments the impotence of man in the face of destiny, Corneille's tragedies exalts the freedom to decide. Men and women can exert their will and rise superior to their destinies. Human will had been exalted by the Renaissance, but it was often will to power, to self-assertion. Corneille respects the will only when it acts in a good cause, when it is generous and great-hearted; and since duty, generosity, greatness of heart are very difficult, difficulty itself becomes the sign of duty, the very essence of duty. So that when the characters of Corneille see something difficult, they immediately decide that it is their duty to do it. Perhaps it was necessary in this violent and passionate age to propose an ideal of gratuitous self-discipline. Perhaps only passions could triumph over pas-
ession; the low or selfish, passions mastered by bringing in another, the passion of pride. But these characters were not only proud, they were increasingly rational, and that is far more important. Seventeenth-century tragedy is the rationalistic tragedy par excellence, and reason complements pride as an instrument of mastery over the passions. Corneille presents love as one more passion subject to reason.

The lovers that you find in Corneille’s plays make the same kind of declarations as every other lover does; but they explain very coolly and logically just why it’s necessary for the loved one to be loved, why the lover must die if he doesn’t get what he wants. In other words, they establish an identity between love and reason. They argue that they love whom they love, as they love, because it is the only reasonable thing to do. And if this is so, then love is no longer a passion, it is subject to all the rules and rationalizations of our minds. It can become an element of order rather than a factor of disorder. To come full circle, then, we can see that the parallel of Corneillian tragedy with its reasoning approach to greatness or to love, lay in the classical architecture of Versailles. Versailles had the same tension toward the heights, the same taste for order, the same subordination of the baser passion to the higher ones, including the discomfort of Versailles and its complete lack of any lavatories; and it had the same theatrical quality. And after mid-seventeenth century, Versailles was going to become a symbol of all this kind of grand order, providing the center and the model and the inspiration of all Europe, as we shall see in our next program.

#132 Absolutism and the Social Contract

Versailles was the authoritarian ideal, splendid yet regimented. But there were also those who looked beyond the rules of absolutism to the rules of nature and the rights of man.

Absolutism and the Social Contract this time on The Western Tradition

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Around 1700, Europe lives between two poles of attraction, England and France. Two kinds of culture, two models of what society and government should be like: more or less autocratic, more or less disciplined, more or less orderly; and the two contrasting systems compete at every level for world power, of course, but also for cultural dominion. It was the tug of war between French barracks and English counting house, between informal English gardens and formal French parks, between hunger riots in France and political riots in England. And to start with the contest seems one-sided, because through most of the eighteenth century, French cultural dominance seems to match French political preponderance.

And as with Corneille, the influence of Versailles had seeped into the habits of polite society. First, it was fashions in clothes, in food, and entertainment, then it was fashions in behavior. The rulers of Russia and Poland and Germany kept correspondents to tell them what was the latest rules of etiquette were at the French court. Just because Versailles was so splendid did not mean, however, that it was also gay. It was regimented, monotonous, uncomfortable. Everyone and everything had their assigned part to play in the perfectly ordered, perfectly regulated home. The anarchic individualism of an earlier time was banished, in art as in court ritual. Individual works of art lost their individuality; they became parts of a great monumental decoration. Versailles was in effect an authoritarian ideal, with its discipline, its tight impressive structure, its censorship, its limitations. Outside this artificial structure, you were not supposed to explore, because exploration and experimentation outside set limits might produce change. And the great object of classical France in the seventeenth century was to avoid change because change could unbalance the existing state of affairs.

All the curiosities of the human mind had to be guarded against. They were not only dangerous, they were also foolish. Pascal, who was probably the greatest mind of seventeenth-century France, Pascal declared that all the troubles of men came from the fact that they wouldn’t stay quietly at home in their own room and make the most of what they had. Of course Pascal was talking about faith and the privacy in which you could best come to terms with your own spirituality and with God. Even so, this was the thinking of men who had a room of their own to stay in. It was the point of view of satisfied men in a satisfied society whose supreme concern was to preserve stability and the status quo.

And this was the essence of the classical spirit--it loved stability. It was the calm after the storm of the Renaissance and the Reformation, after those great tidal waves of movement and questioning and adventure. Now
was the time for rest and meditation. Time to stop criticizing, time to stop wanting a change; and so politics, religion, society, and art were withdrawn from all the discussions of the past two centuries. The ship of humanity had come to port at last, and all wise men wished that it would stay there forever.

Everything had fallen into place, everything was perfect and perfectly ordered. Why should men risk experiment? Why should they risk speculations which might unsettle everything once more? Of course, you can’t keep the world from turning. One man’s perfection is another man’s anarchy. And so absolutism carried the seeds of its own dissolution. It reflected the triumph of secular values over spiritual ones, the triumph of modern government over feudalism—and that didn’t just mean the triumph of the Crown, but the triumph of the counting house as well which was going to bring change whether the Crown liked it or not and which was going to weigh the balance from the French model back to the English model.

Absolute government was supposed to make not only strong nations but also wealthy nations. Seventeenth-century economic doctrine said that it would achieve this by government regulation of the national economy to augment the power of the state at the expense of its rival. This is the doctrine we call mercantilism. In mercantilism, a country’s wealth lies in its stock of gold and silver. You have to gather in all the gold and silver you can, and you have to develop national industry so that your country can sell as much as possible abroad and buy as little as possible from abroad. That way, bullion flows in, not out, and the country is supposed to be stronger. National industries, however, have to be protected against foreign competition, so Mercantilism is both nationalistic and protectionist. In the Netherlands, trading companies like the East India Company had been created by free enterprise, but in France and Italy and central Europe, it would be the state which founded ports like Brest which encouraged trading companies and merchant men to pursue what Colbert called a peaceful war. At first businessmen were going to welcome this, but as they grew stronger, they began to change their minds. Commercial capital doesn’t mind state investment, but it doesn’t want state control. And the mercantilist state classically tells business what to do, as Louis XIV tells the French council of business here. In due course, however, business wanted a say in how the state was run. At the same time, business values began to affect the way people thought about law and society. In this view, law was a practical matter, separate from religion, while politics had nothing to do with theology. These practical gentlemen are Dutch magistrates as painted by Rembrandt.

The seventeenth century didn’t find the rules of human society in some divine revelation. It studied nature and it studied man. Man has will, he can affect his destiny, he doesn’t necessarily have to obey the will of others. He may seek his own satisfaction and happiness, which implies the rights of man; furthermore he is endowed with certain faculties, which means that he is supposed to use these faculties. And nature has made him gregarious and sociable. He wants to live in society, which means he has a social consciousness. It means that he’s capable of social responsibility. This is the vital unwritten rule that nature has engraved on the heart of man, or so argued a Dutch jurist named Hugo Grotius, who would provide the basis of international law as we think of it today.

This idea of society being the outcome of natural tendency was going to be carried still further. The reasoning went this way: Men have a natural inclination to live in orderly and peaceful society. Law grows out of their social instinct; they come together and make a deal, a compromise. They agree to defend property against trespass; they agree to submit to a common authority. And so we imagine that society begins with a contract between men and then a second contract between men and someone to rule over them and protect them. And that is the Social Contract. In seventeenth-century Europe people wanted a strong power that would defend order and peace and force commercial expansion. And so they favored, or at least they accepted, absolute monarchy. But if they should decide that order and peace and trade would do better under some other regime, then they were likely to change their minds, which is exactly what happened in England where the historic political revolutions of the seventeenth century took place and where the political bearings were worked out to justify it.

In England, as you recall, Queen Elizabeth had confirmed the Protestant settlement of her father, Henry VIII. And when Elizabeth died in 1603, she was succeeded by her nearest Protestant relative, the King of Scotland, James VI, who came to England to rule as James I. The King James Bible, by the way, is named after him. James’ son was Charles I and Charles had some of the tendencies of Richelieu and Louis IX, whose aunt he married. He didn’t like competing authorities. He tried to govern and raise taxes without Parliament, to unify and control the Church. He wanted, in other words, to be an absolute king. But unlike Louis XIV, he failed. Religious troubles in Scotland, colonial problems in Ireland, political and religious complications in England all raised a hornet’s nest about Charles’ ears. Parliament wouldn’t vote to pay taxes to support his armed forces because if the king’s military power was too great, he could force Parliament to vote the way he wanted. He could force Parliament to pay the taxes, even if it hadn’t voted for them. In 1642, Charles attempted to arrest five leaders of the House of Commons and then declared war on Parliament.
Thus began the English Civil War, the major battles of which are depicted in this eighteenth-century print. The war lasted for seven years, and it saw the annihilation of the royal army and Charles's surrender. After continuing to intrigue against Parliament, even after his defeat, Charles was tried and executed in 1649.

The brief republican interlude that followed under Oliver Cromwell didn’t work out too well. When Parliament entertained a motion to disband Cromwell’s army, an army that had grown very powerful after its conquest of Scotland and Ireland, Cromwell retaliated by disbanding Parliament, and he ruled thereafter as Lord Protector. When Cromwell died in 1658, the Stuarts were restored under Charles II, until, that is, another revolution by Parliament, the Glorious Revolution, so called because it was almost bloodless. It swept out Charles’ successor, James II, in 1688, and it placed on the throne a Dutchman, the Prince of Orange, whom history knows as William III. This is a contemporary Dutch print showing William arriving in England. So, by the end of the seventeenth-century, the absolute power of the Crown had been broken and the contest for supremacy had ended in a sort of partnership between parliament and the king—competitive to begin with and fraught with tension, but settling down eventually to a parliamentary monarchy. Each of England’s two revolutions was also going to inspire a great work of political thought. In 1651, two years after the execution of Charles I, Thomas Hobbes published Leviathan. And John Locke published his Treatise on Civil Government in 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution.

Hobbes’s book, Leviathan, which incidentally, he wrote while in exile in Paris—Leviathan, then took the parent theories about nature and human nature and turned them on their ear. “Mankind,” said Hobbes, “is naturally wicked.” Man is not a social being, he’s a purely selfish creature always seeking his own advance. There are no higher aims, there is no good except pleasure, there is no evil except hate, there is no freedom beside the freedom to follow your passions. “The basic principle of life is selfishness,” said Hobbes, and with everybody struggling to get what they want, the natural state of man is what Hobbes calls a state of war, a constant struggle of man against man. And in this unregenerate state of nature, people live in continual fear, and their lives, said Hobbes in a famous phrase, “are solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” So if we don’t want the human race to kill itself off, we have to introduce an artificial remedy, which is power instead of the basic equality of humans. We now introduce a regime of inequality, the only thing that can save them from the destruction and discomfort that free men inflict on each other. In other words, we set up a political society under the authority of a monarch who necessarily has to be absolute.

“It’s no use talking about Social Contract,” said Hobbes, “because man won’t keep any contract.” The only thing that can repress their savage instincts is the force and the fear that force inspires. So the absolute king must have the power of arms and also the power to settle disputes, which we call justice. And, since you cannot reconcile liberty and life because the pursuit of liberty leads to anarchy and loss of life, it’s better to choose life because, without life, liberty isn’t much use. And however arbitrary and unpleasant this may be, it’s still better than the savage freedom of catch-as-catch-can from which it preserves us. So, Hobbes’ state is, in fact, a leviathan, an enormous, monstrous machine which takes the place of natural society. Now you have to understand that Hobbes defended absolute power, not because of some divine right, but in the name of the interest of ordinary people who needed security and peace in order to live and enjoy life.

So he wasn’t interested in the majesty of power but in its utility. His absolute ruler had to deliver, he was judged by his success in providing not justice or virtue, but peace and prosperity, which is pretty much how many of us judge our own rulers, whether we admit it or not. Still, Hobbes has always shocked respectable people. Fortunately, respectable people were going to get a philosopher after their own heart in John Locke. Locke, who sailed to England with William of Orange, had just produced a theory that could be used to justify England’s removal of its previous king, James II, king by the grace of God. He had set out to prove the right of a subject to rebel against his sovereign.

Locke, too, started out from the state of nature, but he disagreed with Hobbes. “The state of nature is simply imperfect,” said Locke. To remedy its imperfection, men get together and they agree on a Social Contract. This contract is concluded among men for their own advantage and it implies playing the game of social living by definitely established rules. If anybody breaks these rules, he’s outlawed. And if it is the ruler who breaks the rules, then any member of society, and of course society as a whole, has the right to appeal to the rules which had been agreed on, and if necessary, has the right to appeal to them by force. And Locke’s conclusion was simple: If the executive power does not act according to the ends for which it has been set up, if it infringes on the liberties of the people, then this power must be removed from the hands of whoever holds it. And in fact, if the people have reason to suspect that the would-be tyrant is preparing the means to enslave them, they have the right, by natural law, to take preventative action and by open rebellion to keep him from carrying out his plans.
So John Locke had not only justified the Glorious Revolution, he had also produced the concept of a natural man on the whole, decent enough and civilized enough to come to terms with himself and behaving according to natural law. This idea of natural law and Locke's conception of man as naturally decent came to form the essence and the base of the new English legal and constitutional thought. Natural law also entered into the politics of its time and particularly into the politics of England, whose success would influence the rest of the world from then on. Moreover, it marked an alliance with Protestantism, influencing it so much, that gradually and increasingly, the conception of man's fall from grace was abandoned in favor of a new idea of perfectibility, man's perfectibility and society's perfectibility by man. Above all, natural law meant that men could now see that divine right, as soon as it pretended to establish the absolute rule of a man as shown here, or a regime; divine right was not supernatural, it was anti-natural, and as such to be scorned and attacked.

Now this, of course, was only the beginning. The development and the diffusion of all these ideas has gone on to our own day, but the seventeenth century marked a decisive stage because the theory of natural rights, the theory of the rights of man and finally the reality of hard facts had at last been joined together in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and in the ideas and in the institutions arising out of it. Locke was less vigorous than Grotius, he was more superficial than Hobbes, but he was the right man at the right time. He was responsible for the secularization of political theory and of legal theory. He was responsible for the divorce between reason and mystery and for the relegation of divine intervention to where it belonged, in Heaven, far removed from the realities of worldly affairs. And we might fairly take this passage from Locke's Essay on Civil Government as marking both his purpose and his significance to us: "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone; and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it. That being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possession." The following century was going to write the concrete eulogy of these words.

#133 The Enlightened Despots

They tried to run their states rationally, efficiently, profitably. They encouraged trade, developed bureaucracy, and were the patrons of great philosophers; and they spent much of their time at war fighting one another.

The Enlightened Despots this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Throughout history, you can find a correspondence between political power and economic prosperity. As a rule, at least in relation to their size, the most economically advanced countries tend to be maritime powers. In the ancient world, this was true of the Venetians, the Greeks, the Romans, and in the seventeenth century and eighteenth century, it would be true about the Dutch, the English, and the French. Now this is especially understandable when you consider what travel was like in the pre-modern world—difficult and slow. Water was by far the best highway. Now let me give you an example that's only three hundred years-old. In 1698, the Estates, that is, the Parliament of Burgundy, voted money to buy a large bronze statue of Louis XIV. The statue was cast in Paris, then it was brought by river to Assurée and from there it set off to Dijon, the capital of Burgundy to Dijon by land, about a hundred miles away. But it got stuck in the mud, and it had to be kept in a shed for twenty-one years until the road was good enough to bear it.

Given that land transport was in such a parlous state, and bear in mind, that France probably had the best roads in Europe, water transport was much better. Rivers were useful, but rivers had problems. They had rapids; they had sand banks and shallows; and the water levels went up and down; and they also had tolls, which could make even a short journey expensive. The sea, however, was a river without rapids or shallows, or tolls; and ships could travel far and fast on it, carrying more cargo and more people than any river barge could. The Italian city states in the Renaissance, Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth century, Holland, Britain, France in the seventeenth, all demonstrated that easy access to water meant trade, which meant prosperity, which meant power. And to lose access meant strangulation.

In 1571, the loss of Cyprus to the Turks sealed the decline of Venice. In 1588, the English defeat of the Spanish Armada began the naval decline of Spain. And half a century after that, English fleets began to defeat the Dutch, who had previously ruled the high seas, and that was the beginning of English ascendency. So its a good idea to keep your eyes on what happens at sea. Now the connection between wealth and naval power, between overseas
trade and prosperity, had also struck the rulers of countries in eastern central Europe that didn't have access to the ocean. One can describe much of their activities in the seventeenth, and especially in the eighteenth century, as a struggle to get to the sea, and on it, and across it. Russia drove towards the Black Sea and the Baltic; Prussia, which had Baltic ports, tried to start trading companies to sail the high seas; and the Austrians tried to revive Antwerp although they didn't succeed because the Dutch wouldn't let them. Instead, they created a new port at the top of the Adriatic, Trieste, which would remain Austria's chief naval base into the twentieth century.

None of these enterprises was very successful, however, because continental powers had to concentrate on fighting various wars in Europe. So even though wealth and power depended on naval activities, security and greed still focused on land wars. And yet, the new pragmatic business mentality was gaining ground even on land, serving to moderate the enormous destructiveness of land war. Devastation after all, is bad for business, and this attitude was something new.

For thousands of years, warfare was more than just that, it was the devastation of enemy land. When two Greek cities went to war, the first thing they did was to ravage the fields and orchards of the opponent. When Louis XIV fought the Hapsburgs 2300 years later, his troops burned and ravaged the Rhineland so badly that they were still remembered in the twentieth century. The pretty town of Heidelberg in the Neckar valley was almost completely destroyed by the French in 1689, and again in 1693.

What you see in Heidelberg today has almost all been built in the eighteenth century, except for the castle whose ruins still stand on the hill above the town. But in the eighteenth century, rulers and their generals started to try to keep war away from civilians. War became an exercise for soldiers; campaigns were decided by set piece battles and even more by sophisticated maneuvers--who could out flank whom, who could get the best positions. Armies which had always lived off the land also began to operate a self-contained units with their own supply trains and stores, and field kitchens.

This development was in part a revulsion against the bloodshed and destruction of seventeenth-century warfare, but it was also part of a more rational approach to war. War was coming to be regarded as being more about gain than about destruction. If you approach war as logically as you approach business, you keep destruction to a minimum. You minimize incidental losses, and you don't destroy civilians or civilian property, or civilian productivity because famine and ruins are bad for the economy. And you don't want to destroy wealth, just win it.

Nevertheless, like every other century, the eighteenth century had its wars, especially in central and eastern Europe, where states were still establishing firm borders at each other's expense. This is when the great realm of Russia became a European power, under the rule of Peter the Great, and later under the rule of Catherine the Great. This is when a poor marginal state in north Germany turned into the Kingdom of Prussia. It forged a head under the guidance of Frederick William I, who thought the best investment was an army, and under his son, Frederick the Great, a brilliant general who cashed the dividends on his father's investments. And this is also when the Austrian Hapsburg's rolled back the Turks and affirmed their hold on central and southeast Europe under the guidance of a remarkable woman, Maria Theresa, the Archduchess of Austria and Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, and later under her son, Joseph II.

The wars in central and eastern Europe that made all this possible were important because they set the shape of the region for a hundred and fifty years. And they affected everybody else: the English, the French, the Swedes, the Dutch. Because when one power became too strong, the others would intervene against it, which was the beginning of the system of a balance of power. The Poles were especially affected by these wars because Russia and Prussia and Austria tended to settle their differences at the expense of their large divided kingdom. By 1795, Poland was carved up among the three powers.

But if you take your eyes off the map of Europe, you will find that the eighteenth century wars were not really about Europe but about world dominion and world trade. The French, English, Spanish and Dutch were really fighting about who was going to get the Spanish trade and Spanish possessions in the Americas. About what was going to happen to French possessions in America and India; and about the fate of British colonies in North America. And so the scale of European politics had exploded and wars were no longer primarily about family politics, they were about trade and profit. But the continental rulers in central and eastern Europe, and other rulers who didn't have competitive navies, could not participate in these great oceanic contests, and so instead, they tried to make their realms more efficient, more rational, more productive. They tried to generate by internal reform what they couldn't get from overseas trade.
And this was the origin of what we describe as the enlightened despotism. Would-be enlightened despotism were to be found in Naples and Tuscany, Spain and Portugal, Prussia and Austria, Russia, Scandinavia, all trying to run their states rationally, efficiently and profitably.

The typical enlightened despot was Frederick II, King of Prussia from 1740 to 1786. Frederick was a patron of Voltaire. He liked to describe himself as the first servant of his people. He wrote several books explaining that statesmanship should be founded on virtue and justice and responsibility. And he spent much of his reign breaking his word, making war, enlarging the territories he had inherited. Men like Frederick were supposed to be enlightened because they tried to go about their business more rationally than their predecessors. They were interested in revenue; they knew that revenue was higher when production and exchange were more intense, and since they couldn't get to the sea and exploit it, they tried to develop the economy in other ways. They rationalized government administrations. They introduced a census of the population which could be used for taxing citizens, and to draft men into the army. They surveyed lands to know just what properties were worth. They named streets and numbered the houses in order to make identification and accounting easier, and they developed the bureaucracy and trained bureaucrats to work more efficiently. The spirit of the new bureaucrats was completely secular. They had no preconceptions and they would try anything, provided it worked. Everybody and everything was grist to their mill and grist to their will, and one result of this attitude was that just as in the older trading cities, bureaucrats were not interested in religious conformity. Religion was simply one factor in their political calculation. Rulers might well be practicing Christians, but politically they would tolerate any kind of worship that didn't trouble the public order and that contributed to public wealth. One result of this was that the eighteenth century turns out to be a great age of prosperous refugees settling in other more pragmatic countries. Catholics from Ireland fleeing English rule, supporters of the exiled Stuarts getting out of Scotland, and Huguenots leaving France after Louis XIV abolished the Edict of Nantes and began a new wave of persecution.

The Huguenot emigration was going to give England actor David Garrick in the eighteenth century, Cardinal Newman in the nineteenth century; and in the twentieth, Winston Churchill whose mother's family had immigrated to America from France. The Irish filled Europe with soldiers of fortune, and they were going to provide France with two presidents; General MacMahon in the nineteenth century, and General DeGaulle in the twentieth. Even the Great Duke of Wellington had an Irish grandfather, although Wellington himself always denied he was Irish. "A man," he said, "is not a horse because he was born in a stable."

But the bureaucracy went beyond religious tolerance. The same practical reasons that made the state relatively tolerant or really indifferent to religious issues, this also suggested that the state attack the Church, in so far as the Church might aspire to operate as an independent entity. The state, after all, had to dominate and control everything in its ken. It attacked the Church in order to get the Church's money or its property, and so put them to more productive uses. It put pressure on the Church to carry out the Church's social obligations. To operate as an effective machine for charity, or as an effective representative of the central government. And it attacked the Church in order to abolish, or to limit ecclesiastical censorship and to improve education.

The new states were interested in the Church insofar as it could contribute to their plans. Joseph II of Austria, for example, regarded parish priests as salaried state officials whose duty was to co-operate with police in the service of the state. So in their quest for education, efficiency, rationalism, these new bureaucratic states relied on anybody who helped them—skilled professional teachers, writers, and scientists—mostly from western Europe. And it was to impress and attract this educated and highly influential minority, that some of the central and east European princes removed censorship, and introduced a certain freedom of the press in their dominions. They wanted to impress the Westerners, and they also wanted to copy them because Western practices and ideas, especially English and French ideas, were connected with other Western superiorities in technology, weaponry productivity. What Frederick of Prussia and Joseph of Austria wanted most was a well-ordered state, a population that was prosperous, educated, satisfied because it lived under efficient government and under wise laws that were consistently administered by royal justice, not capriciously by nobles on the estates. They wanted cities growing with industry, fattened by production and profit. And above all, they wanted regular taxes, efficiently collected from everybody, coming in regularly, reliably, to pay for the state's machinery and for a large well-trained, well-equipped army.

But that was exactly what they didn't have, and to get it would require a social revolution to change things from what they actually were, to what they should be, and to change them quickly because they didn't have time to sit around and wait. But you also have to bear in mind that the last thing they wanted was a real social revolution. Frederick and Joseph and the others wanted the social hierarchy to go on just as before. They wanted the nobles muzzled and tamed, but they did not want to turn society upside down. They wanted it to function efficiently for their
benefit, for the benefit of the state and of its absolute ruler, and that was it. But in Prussia and Hungary, the nobles wouldn’t stand for reform. In Belgium, the middle class objected and rioted. In other countries, the middle class was too weak to help, and hence useless. In the Catholic countries and in Russia, the local Church protested. In Transylvania and Bohemia, the peasants revolted and elsewhere they either couldn’t help or when they tried, they weren’t wanted.

At an impasse, the reforming princes found their main allies in a group of men whom you would not at first expect to support them—the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Men like Diderot, Voltaire, Hume, Bentham, and Kant. At the end of the seventeenth century, the first dictionary of the French Academy defined the philosophe as a student of the sciences, a wise man who lives a quiet life, and/or a man who by free thought, puts himself above the ordinary duties and obligations of civil life.

You must not think of the philosophes as what we today call philosophers, professional hair-splitters, logicians, semantists. The eighteenth-century philosopher was what we might today describe as a sociologist, in a sense that he studied society with an eye on the possibilities of social reform. Above all, he or she was a free thinker, at least in the sense that they were hostile to the commonly accepted version of revealed religion. And that’s how you might best think of the philosophes, as free thinkers and social critics.

In their own minds however, the philosophes were, above all, rationalists; people who as Emmanuel Kant put it, dared to know. People who were determined to imbue the world with a consciousness of the rights and the powers of human intelligence. Their point of view had been shaped by the science of Isaac Newton who taught that all nature is founded in universal law, and that its regularities can be understood and mastered by the human mind; and it was shaped by the psychology of John Locke who taught that the faculty of reasoning seldom or never deceives those who trust it, and that men are reasonable beings, capable of using their own knowledge and intelligence for the promotion of their own happiness.

All this being certain, the philosophes believed that if you want to make men happy and perfect, all you have to do is enlighten them, and their ideals of enlightenment came curiously close to those of the reforming priests. The philosophes, like the princes, wanted order, prosperity, tolerance, education and justice fairly administered; they thought the Church was one of the main obstacles to all this. They thought that the middle class as a source of prosperity and enlightenment, should be encouraged, and its interests favored. They thought that aristocratic privilege was unjustified by reason and ought to be ended so that advancement should be open to talent and capacity; and taxes should be paid by all. They knew exactly what reforms were necessary to bring about the good society, and they had talked about it, and they had written about it for years to persuade their fellow citizens, and it hadn’t done a bit of good. So what they wanted now were philosopher kings—enlightened despots. And they saw them not in the West where established society was impossible to move, but in central and eastern and southern Europe where new lands were ready to be molded into perfection, or so they thought. We shall see just how enlightened these enlightened despots were in our next program. Until then . . .

#134 The Enlightenment

It was a time of shimmering art, delightful architecture; a time of fantasy, whimsy, unexpected twists; when philosophers who argued the interests of man joined with despots who pursued the interests of the state.

The Enlightenment this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time we ended with the philosophes—remember, eighteenth century philosophers, many of whom were infatuated with the reforming rulers of central and eastern Europe. The philosophes believed that what Europe really needed were philosopher kings, enlightened despots to bring innovations in political, religious, and educational practices; above all, to make society more rational. And the movement that followed came to be known as the Enlightenment.

Prussia’s Frederick the Great was thought by Voltaire to be the nearest thing to a philosopher king in all of Europe, although the reality of Frederick’s enlightened despotism was far less enlightened than the philosophes thought; and Russia’s Catherine the Great was described by Diderot as having the heart of Brutus with the face of Cleopatra. Actually, she had the heart of Nero and the face of Mac West.
But to Diderot, it seemed the perfect alliance, so the world got a splendid collection of his correspondence with Catherine the Great, who became great largely because of the publicity the philosophes gave her. And the same thing happened with Voltaire, who kept up a lively correspondence with Frederick the Great. It was a kind of a Renaissance relationship between men of letters who provided adulation and publicity and rulers who provided them with gifts and subsidies and self-respect.

But behind the relationships and behind the words, the reality was quite different. Privilege was not abolished in Prussia or Russia or any of the new states. On the contrary, the rulers had to rely on the nobles ever more, because the nobles were the only class that was used to command, and so, the rulers wound up giving nobles more privileges. In the Prussian army, for example, only nobles could be officers, a situation that went on with very few exceptions for at least a hundred years. And serfdom was not abolished in Prussian and Russian and most Hapsburg lands. The serfs were freed on royal estates, but not on the noble's estates, and so while the philosophes talked about freedom, what the enlightened despots wanted was not freedom but regimentation and discipline.

By the time Frederick II died, four percent of the Prussian population was in the army, even though his country was at peace. Four percent of the American population today would give us something like ten million soldiers. In Russia, Catherine the Great instructed her ministers to produce a constitution, had her instructions translated and circulated all over Europe to show how enlightened her country was; but nothing ever came of it. It was all like the trip she took through her dominions to see for herself how her people lived. Everywhere she went, she found clean villages with well-built houses, fat cattle, cheerful people; but the villages were actually stage sets. They were set up before she arrived; they were taken down to be reconstructed further along her route with the same cattle and the same cast of contented peasants. The man who arranged all this was Count Potemkin, Catherine's favorite and chief minister, and the villages with which he fooled the Empress—and I suspect she wanted to be fooled—these villages were called Potemkin villages, a term for "empty, misleading show," and the technique is still used today.

Catherine's constitutional reforms were also false, empty fronts; and when Catherine's philosopher friends reproached her with this, she answered, "It's easy for you to talk, you write on paper. I write on human flesh." In other words, it's easy to recommend improvements when you sit in your study; it's harder to produce change in real life. But was that really the difference between her and the philosophers, or was it something else? In truth, the alliance between philosophers and enlightened despotism was based on a misunderstanding. The philosophers were interested in man, his progress, his dignity. Their despotic friends were interested in the state, its interests, its power. Both believed in treating people as individuals, but for very different reasons. When the despots treated people as individuals, it wasn't because they believed in the dignity of man, but because it was to the advantage of the state. It was easier to deal with a dust heap of separate individuals than with corporations and estates and other bodies with a collective personality and collective power. So where to the philosophers the equality of the individual before the law was a principle, to the rulers it was a means to eliminate the diversity of interest groups that made governing difficult.

But even with this misunderstanding, the alliance lasted because it was also based on interest. The philosophers got respect and money and favors, the despots got useful publicity agents. And the misunderstanding was founded on distance as well. When Voltaire finally went to Berlin, when Diderot traveled to St. Petersburg, the reality was considerably less attractive than the dream. But as long as they stayed in Paris, it was easy to believe in the new societies and their enlightened despots.

In the eighteenth century, Russia and even Prussia were, to many people, impossibly far away. Of those philosophers who actually went to see for themselves, some saw only Potemkin villages and were fooled. Some were disappointed with what they found, others were bribed or slandered. But most of the philosophes were just men who wanted to believe in something. They were surrounded by inequity and injustice at home, and the real abuses that they saw around them made them ignore, made them forget, made them dismiss the much worse abuses that took place in these utopias far away, which they wanted to regard as the promised land.

So the Enlightenment was very limited. The states of the enlightened despots were modernized; they were dragged out of the dark ages into something a little less dark. Life in the dominions of Prussia and Austria did improve in some material respects; and the state machine and the military machine became competitive with the West. But you have to put it into perspective and you have to remember that the enlightened despots were always more despotic than they were enlightened.
They were also exceptional, as you can see from the example of Germany, or rather, the Germans. At this point, the Germans were hardly a nation. They had no sense of national identity. The Holy Roman Empire in which they lived was neither Holy, nor Roman, nor really an empire, just a conglomeration of states. Any unity the empire ever imposed was purely formal. The Germans were divided among two hundred or three hundred states, and ten times as many autonomous, sovereign entities, some of them no larger than a ranch in Texas, eighty of them less than twenty-four miles wide. It was the old feudal structure preserved, with dukes and counts and margraves and bishops and abbots and princes, all claiming their absolute right to rule over their little bit of land. Every ruling family claimed absolute power. They kept their position by playing the King of France off against the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna, and as the eighteenth century progressed, they fell more and more under French influence. Travel through Germany today, and you'll see that every other town has its palace copied from the French and probably a romantic annex like the hamlet Marie Antoinette had built at Versailles, with a dairy and an rustic cabin and a fake grotto or two. But while fashion and conspicuous consumption were copied from the West, little else was; nor did the conspicuous consumption of the German states mean sophistication or good manners. Here was the very antithesis of the ideal of order and refinement that lay at the base of the Enlightenment. At the Court of Prussia, for example, when the footmen rattled the plates at dinner, King Frederick William, Frederick the Great's father, was quite likely to whip out his pistols and shoot at their wigs to set them on fire as a punishment. And there is a description of a dinner which the Archbishop of Mainz gave in the late eighteenth century to his fellow electors—the princes who were the managing committee of the empire—a dinner that lasted from midday until nine in the evening, and while they ate a military band provided constant music. When they had finished eating, the electors, led by the court marshal, danced on the table until they fell under it.

You might say that it wasn't really safe to dine with a German prince, and the princes who were also bishops were the worst, partly because they liked practical jokes like water spouting from the seats or dishes or glasses with holes in them, partly because they grew the best wines in Germany and drank them, of course. At every meal, the prince-bishop of Munster used to empty in one draught a large silver church bell full of wine, and he expected every one of his guests to do the same. Between meals, hunting was the rule. Almost every crowned head of the time loved these killing sprees. It was the only exercise they got, after all, apart from running after women or after boys; and furthermore, since each territory was considered by its ruler as his own private estate and hunting preserve, agriculture was nearly brought to a standstill.

It isn't very surprising that quite a number of these princes were on the verge of madness, impotence, alcoholism—or over the verge. They were also great collectors, and their collecting was obsessive. The Duke of Wurtemburg collected over four thousand different editions of the Bible. The Duke of Brunswick collected vast numbers of harpsichords and spinets, the best of which he reserved for the use of his favorite cats. Another prince decided the time of day according to his own convenience; the clocks of the state had all to be set according to the hour which he chose for his own library. And the Duke of Wurzburg spent all his income on furnishing a large room with every kind of bass viol, presided over by an immense double bass which was so big it could only be played from a high stool with the aid of a bow as long as a mast.

So you can see that the Enlightenment didn't reach very far, and you can see why the subjects of the more backward rulers envied those people who lived in lands like Prussia, let alone France; and you can understand, also, why even the very limited reforms of the enlightened despots could come as a relief to their subjects at a time when most rulers were really drunken, incompetent tyrants.

And yet these boorish clods lived in palaces, worshiped in churches, applauded in theaters that were epitomes of grace. The style of the eighteenth century is lighter, daintier, Wittier, than that of any other age. It's what we call Rococo, and it originated in France, where people were tired of the pretentious grandeur of seventeenth-century classicism. When Louis XIV died in 1714, this ushered in revolt that had been brewing for a long time against the stateliness and the restraints he had imposed. Imagination, grace, comfort took over, at least for the well-to-do, and they created a world on which crude life impinged as little as possible. Furniture grew softer and less massive. Dress for men and women got lighter and brighter. What people wanted now was not strength but sensibility, not ponderousness but pleasure. And so, solemnity went out, elegance and fantasy came in. Probably the most interesting French patron of literature and the arts was Madame du Pompadour, who was the mistress of Louis XV. It was Pompadour who protected and helped the writers who put together the monument of eighteenth century thought that was the Encyclopedia; and it was Pompadour who patronized painters like Boucher, who characteristically painted her holding a book. Color, freedom, delight, enchantment are the hallmarks of eighteenth century painting. The enchanted exuberance of Boucher, the enchanted theater of Tiepolo, the enchanted mirages of the Guardi brothers, the enchanted flippancy of Fragonard.
You can see this best in the work of the most representative painter of the eighteenth century, Jean Antoine Watteau, with its delicacy and charm, its superficial relations, its shimmering colors. There's nothing solid or eternal about the people and the scenes he paints. They're here to enjoy themselves in a trip, in a game, a picnic, a dance; their relations are fragile because pleasure is fragile and transitory, and so is life. It's interesting that Watteau's best known painting, "The Embarkation for Cythera," takes a traditional theme, which is a pilgrimage, and transposes it to a frivolous level. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem becomes the pilgrimage to Cythera, the island of love. Here a group of ladies and gentlemen are embarking for Cythera, and Cythera shimmers across the water like a sort of Jerusalem, just as enchanted but profane. And the whole scene is highly theatrical, which is another characteristic of the rococo and of eighteenth century society. Rococo gardens, for example, were artificial recreations of nature with artificial waterfalls, ruins and wilderness, as they called it, that made gardens into picturesque places for dreaming and rambling. Gardens have always tried to recreate nature, but those of the seventeenth century had been stately, orderly creations—no shadow, no mystery, just straight beds, grand alleys, vast vistas. In the eighteenth century, however, you get irregularities, whimsy, unexpected twists. And this was also reflected in a contemporary fad for exotic things—Turkish fashions, anything outlandish. There was more trade overseas, and the ships that went to the Near East and to China brought back a lot of things new that looked different, and since they looked different, they looked attractive. They looked vaporous, they looked frivolous, they fitted the contemporary protest against the old formality. Like gardens, rococo fashions were as elaborate, as artificial as possible, from the wigs and bows and baskets to the completely useless little shoes. The more useless, the more anti-functional, the better; and this appreciation of the ephemeral in everything is especially evident in music. What, after all, could be more ephemeral than music? Not the notes printed on paper, but the performance which, in that time, could not be captured or preserved. Music is the typical happening, and music was the model of eighteenth century art. It fascinated Watteau, who often painted himself as a musician. It fascinated his contemporaries. The eighteenth century was the great age of music, or perhaps music was the great art of the eighteenth century, especially elegant and witty music as epitomized by Mozart, who died in his mid-thirties just like Watteau.

Even rococo architecture looks musical. Rococo architects built theaters and opera houses designed so that the public could enjoy each other even more than what was going-on on the stage, and opera houses went on being built in rococo style for two hundred years. And they built churches that looked like opera houses. Where churches of the past were mysterious, awesome, rococo churches are a garden of delight. There's no trace of counter-reformation hellfire; there's no trace of Puritan sobriety and restraint. Joy has replaced fear, scenery has replaced ritual, display has replaced inspiration. It's all stucco and gilt and curlicues, and a lot of mirrors to reflect the light. God himself is a delight, and you expect a priest to burst into an aria.

Now, history doesn't pay much attention to pleasure, and frivolity is not a favorite of scholars, who are made of sterner stuff. But you should remember that the lighter and softer sensibility of the rococo period also went with greater sensitivity—sensitivity not just to our own feelings but to the feelings of others. More and more members of the upper classes did not want their feelings bruised, and so they didn't want to see pain or suffering which were, after all, standard aspects of contemporary life; and it was the more sensitive people of this age, like Madame du Pompadour for example, who began to curtail torture and public executions and the repressive and cruel legislation that had survived for centuries. It was people like these who welcomed penal reform in the last third of the eighteenth century, or at least who welcomed campaigns for penal reform, that tried to fit punishment to crime and to social utility, rather than to age-old horrors like cutting off a hand for stealing a loaf of bread. Some called for reform because they were enlightened, and I shall talk about that next time, but a lot of people wanted or accepted reform simply because their tastes had changed—their manners, their feelings, had become more humane, they were more sensitive. And if you do good for selfish reasons, that's all right, too.

#135 The Enlightenment and Society

By the eighteenth century, crops were larger, towns and ports were growing, the power of merchants, manufacturers, lawyers, was increasing, and their success nurtured new ideas that would change the world.

The Enlightenment of Society this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

It's stupid and absurd to burn people for their ideas, but it's just as stupid to believe that ideas don't matter. When you think that ideas don't matter, you can be tolerant about them, which really means that you're