

# Do North Americans Understand the Middle Ages Better Than Europeans?

By NORMAN P. TANNER

**T**HE SHORT ANSWER to the question posed in this title is, "Yes, in many ways."

First, a few words of introduction. For students and enthusiasts of the Middle Ages—the thousand years in Western Europe from the end of the Classical world to around 1500—May is the month of the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies sponsored by the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. Please permit an attender from the other side of the Atlantic to make a few observations.

From small beginnings, this great congress, now known affectionately and worldwide simply as "Kalamazoo," in many ways represents the Mecca of medieval studies today. For the 28th annual congress, held this year on May 6-9, there were some 2,700 participants. Approximately 1,200 papers were read at about 400 sessions, making this by far the largest medieval congress anywhere in the world. Sixty-four publishers, booksellers and artisans provided a wondrous exhibition and sale of books, new and second-hand, and artifacts, with generous discounts for buyers. The four days also provided an unrivaled opportunity to meet and talk with people interested in the Middle Ages.

"Congress," the official term, is really too solemn a word. "Kalamazoo" was an event, a celebration of the Middle Ages, a pilgrimage, a jamboree in the best sense of the word. Generous hospitality was provided—especially for pilgrims from abroad, who came in large numbers—both by Western Michigan University and by its Medieval Institute. Professor Otto Gründler, president of the Medieval Institute and now the guiding light of the congress, warmly welcomed participants, as did many societies, from numismatists to associations commemorating Richard II or Christine de Pizan. And there was more—medieval music and drama and a famous dance. Even the weather smiled on us.

My strongest impression, speaking as one attending the congress for the first time, was of the sheer range, intensity and vitality of interest in the Middle Ages. No

**NORMAN P. TANNER, S.J.**, a specialist in medieval history, holds a doctorate from Oxford and currently lectures on church history both at Oxford and at the Jesuit-founded Heythrop College that is now affiliated with London University.

question is feared or regarded as taboo. That is the first reason why I believe Americans have a better understanding of the Middle Ages than Europeans do. For the medieval West was also an intensely curious civilization. Its universities were so bold and broad-minded that they gave a central place in the curriculum of lectures and disputations to what were called *Quodlibeta* questions, questions about "any matters whatsoever" that lecturers (and students) might like to raise. In all sorts of other ways every avenue of human concern was explored. "Kalamazoo" parallels this exploration to a degree that few other institutions are prepared to do.

You may think that a similar exploration is just what has been happening in Europe during the last half-century or so, with the movement away from political and constitutional history to more sociological and psychological approaches. Witness, for example, the French *Annales* school of historians. I think, however, there is a difference. The European approach can be rather of a "museum-piece" genre: asking curious and interesting questions of the Middle Ages but ones that are safely distant from our present way of life—collecting curiosities, if you like. The strength of American historians is to engage their own concerns and way of life in the questions they put. Relevance makes them better able to understand a culture that was focused intimately upon the human condition.

**A** SECOND REASON why American historians have a privileged entry into the Middle Ages is that their civilization (apart from that of Native Americans) is of an "age" similar to that of medieval Europe. We think of the latter as an old civilization, but it wasn't. Rather it was a young-to-mature culture, like that of North America today. It drew on the ancient Greek and Roman world, just as America draws on Europe. Yet it had fundamentally new beginnings in the aftermath of the fall of Rome and eventually grew into a maturity of its own, just as North America has done. In many ways Americans have a better intuitive grasp of what was going on in the Middle Ages than those living in the older world of Europe today.

So often Europe's physical proximity to its medieval past proves deceptive. On the European continent are to be found the visible remains of that past—the churches and castles and the overwhelming majority of the manuscripts. Yet we Europeans often mistake outward appearances for inner reality, the letter for the spirit, and

are incredulous that others might have better insights. We are so dazzled by what we see that we fail to understand that things were once very different, especially when these differences offend us. It is hard for us to realize, to take but one example, that the interiors of churches did not contain the austere and whitewashed walls that we now see but rather were covered with a riot of color and paintings. Much medieval architecture, from towers and steeples to town halls, as well as much of life, was close to the skyscrapers of New York and Chicago in striving and intent—a point that is difficult for Europeans to accept. Teaching at universities was nearer to that at American colleges than to what takes place at Oxford and Cambridge today.

**T**HIS BRINGS ME to the third reason. Medieval Europe was an unusually religious world, with a diversity and exuberance in this area of life that accords better with American than with contemporary European experience. Moreover, people in the Middle Ages were able to combine religion with materialism and secularism in a way that modern Americans also manage to do, whereas Europeans nervously find only disjunction. Nobody can understand medieval Europe without coming to terms with its religion, and here too Americans have the advantage of a better intuitive grasp of the reality.

Let me not decry my own country and continent. Europeans have provided a lead and seriousness in medieval studies, sometimes correcting the excessive speculation, almost fantasizing, of some American scholars. There must be respect for these achievements. Indeed, dialogue between the two continents was a feature of "Kalamazoo '93." Professor John Van Engen, director of the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame, initiated a major conversation with German scholars. On a smaller scale, Professor Laura Gaffuri of the history department at the University of Padua, Italy, and Professor Simon Forde, editor of the *International Medieval Bibliography* and a faculty member of the School of History at the University of Leeds, England, carried on a dialogue regarding Italian and English sources. East European topics also figured significantly. Nevertheless, an exchange of this sort must be a dialogue of equals, in which each side is aware of its strengths. American scholars, while respecting their European colleagues, must be confident of important natural advantages they have over us, especially regarding their intuitive appreciation of medieval civilization.

In this way our understanding of this fascinating and supremely relevant period of our collective past—I say "our" since it belongs to both sides of the Atlantic—will grow and deepen. *Floreat "Kalamazoo '94!"* ■

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