On occasion, when someone has mentioned the Dark Ages, I have asked two or three innocent questions. “How many college-level courses on the Middle Ages have you taken?” (Usual answer: none.) “What is the book on medieval history you have read most recently?” (Usual answer: Duh.)

“Thanks,” I say. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I was just curious.”

Can we talk? Is defaming millions of people over a period of many centuries a necessary part of gospel understanding? “Judge not that ye be not judged” – could the Lord’s injunction apply here as well as in dealing with individuals in our circle of acquaintances?

In Western Europe, as opposed to the Eastern Empire with its great center at Constantinople, a period of decline is clearly evident even before the collapse of Roman rule. As time went on, the economy became a basket case. Regions, even localities, became largely self-sufficient. Large-scale international trade dried up. The educational and cultural standards of the late Empire could not be maintained. Political fragmentation led to the rise of local strongmen and eventually kings who had poor control over their supposed kingdoms.

But even during these discouraging times, stretching roughly from AD 500 to 1000, Europeans came up with some inventions that proved extremely important in the long run. The metal plow with moldboard made cultivation more efficient. The three-field system greatly increased the agricultural yield. The horse collar multiplied the effectiveness of draft animals. The invention of the stirrup – such a seemingly simple device – had a great effect on military combat and the rise to importance of the mounted knight. Windmills, irrigation technology – other things could be mentioned. Even these relatively dispiriting generations of the early Middle Ages, in other words, were not devoid of human ingenuity and creativity.

Monasteries were often little islands or oases of order within the larger landscape. Disciplined monks applied the best agricultural techniques they knew. Some monasteries perpetuated a basic kind of education and through copying manuscripts preserved the heritage of the classical and patristic past.

Then we come to the so called High Middle Ages stretching roughly from the late eleventh through the thirteenth century. The population expanded. This was the age of the rise of towns. Western Europe became increasingly urbanized. Trade greatly increased.

It was an exciting time to be alive. No one said, “Poor me, to be born in the terribly dark Middle Ages.” No one used that term to describe the times in which they lived. To be sure, it has always been possible to lament the particular circumstances that beset us, but if you think people of the present have no such thoughts, visit the homeless center or talk to political refugees. In many respects the High Middle Ages, especially the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, were characterized by expansion, increased opportunity, and optimism.

What about science? You have picked an easy target. To say that science in the modern sense of the word had to await the Scientific Revolution is a truism. Pierre Duhem and others have spelled out the medieval origins that made possible the breakthroughs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but there is no need to deny the importance of Galileo and Newton. Let’s admit it. Western Europeans of 1100 or 1215 or 1300 lacked some of the ideas and institutions that have become important to us. We would probably be quite unhappy with the lack of modern plumbing.

**Not So Dark After All**

But a period of darkness? Please. That designation helps not at all in understanding. If I am not mistaken, anthropologists studiously avoid such value judgments as they study different tribal societies.

The revival and adaptation of Roman Law during the high Middle Ages, the appropriation of the greatest scientific and medical works from the cultural past, the application of Aristotelian categories to philosophy and theology – whatever we might think about these activities, they should not be dismissed as benighted. Where would we be without them?

We owe to the Middle Ages some important institutions. The university was a creation of the Middle Ages. All is not well in our universities today, but no one can deny their importance in promoting research and creating a class of people possessed of skills and knowledge well beyond the little red schoolhouse. The organization of governmental and ecclesiastical activity by departments with professional functionaries and permanent records was a medieval accomplishment. Lawyers trained in the law schools were used to very good effect by both church and state. Perhaps easier to grasp are the development of representative government and in England the common law and trial by jury.

Yes, I know. What many Latter-day Saints mean when they refer to the Dark Ages is that the Great Apostasy had
occurred. The fullness of the gospel was not on the earth. I am not going to argue that point.

But how much baggage must I take on here? Just because I assert that an apostasy occurred, am I allowed, without study, to pretend that I understand a long period of human history? We don't like it when anti-Mormons pretend to describe us and our religion without conscientious study. We don't ask that they agree with us, but they should be fair. It has even been suggested that a faith culture should be judged not by its worst but by its best. To me, there is something unseemly about the rush to judgment that allows a wholesale dismissal of a thousand years with a wave of the hand.

An institute teacher of my acquaintance once said that people of the Middle Ages were not the perpetrators of the apostasy; they were its victims. They had little choice but to live within the boundaries of their own reality. Don't we read somewhere that those who do not have the law will not be judged by the law? Okay, I'll give a reference: Romans 4:15.

We don't have to pretend that everything was wonderful throughout the Middle Ages. We don't have to defend clerical abuses. Or secular abuses. Many people living at the time were vociferous in their complaints. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, which provides numerous, often hilarious examples of human frailty and gullibility, also includes a "poor parson," someone who exemplified charity in his life.

The thousand years usually denominated the Middle Ages in European history had its examples of cruelty, superstition, corruption, immorality, and degradation. But with all their inadequacies, men and women of the Middle Ages were not devoid of sincerity, kindness, sacrifice, and love of God. It was a mix. The modern world we live in (or post-modern according to some definitions) can be described in almost identical terms.

But, you say, the people of the Middle Ages did not have even the possibility of hearing the gospel in its fullness. Well, all right. But is that not true of most people in the world even today? True enough, the gospel is again on the earth. We want everyone to have a fair opportunity of hearing the message. But we have a long way to go.

If people in the Middle Ages could not learn about the premortal life, could not hear a proper description of the nature of God, and could not experience the satisfaction of temple ordinances, did that mean they were totally without resources? Could they pray? Did they have any opportunity to live the Golden Rule, to love their families, to help their neighbor?

The Time of Restoration

The definitive proof of the Great Apostasy is the fact of the restoration of the gospel. If I have faith in that restoration, it goes without saying that the true Church of Jesus Christ was not on the earth prior to 1830.

But how many Latter-day Saints are willing to include the Renaissance, the Reformation, the exciting seventeenth century, or the Enlightenment in “the Dark Ages”? How many are willing to include the year 1829? The cosmopolitan T’ang dynasty in China (618-907) lacked the gospel of Christ, but its brilliant cultural flowering can scarcely be labeled as “dark.” The same is true of the Byzantine Empire in the ninth century. About the same time the Abbasid caliphate attained its greatest splendor under the famous Haroun Al-Rashid.

Somehow I rather doubt that those willing to assign labels such as Dark Ages are thinking scrupulously about these questions.

As first employed by Francesco Petrarch and others, the disparagement of the Middle Ages was in part a bestowal of a blue ribbon upon oneself. How human! And how patently absurd! It behooves us to avoid sweeping descriptions of long periods either in scorn or in self-congratulatory praise.

Adolph Hitler did not live in the Middle Ages. Neither did Saddam Hussein. One can point to examples of brutality in the Middle Ages, but the bloodiest century in all human history – as you very well know – was the twentieth century.

As a designation of the long period in European history known as the Middle Ages, I think we should retire the phrase “Dark Ages.” The medievalists I know never use it. To employ the phrase as a weapon, with no evidence of study and reflection, betrays that unhappy combination of ignorance and arrogance.

Think of “the honest in heart” who are mentioned in the prayers of the Latter-day Saints. Can we believe that there may have been some honest in heart during the Middle Ages? Think of the millions throughout the world today who live without the restored gospel and do not know they are lacking anything. While using Cell phones and the Internet, they are living in relative darkness. Perhaps most of us will concede that our own lives have gone through phases of confusion and munkness.

I can still hear the inimitable LeGrand Richards as by memory he recited these words from 1 Peter 2:9: “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

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