

The Educated Classes and the Average Man

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John Herman Randall (1899-1980) was an American philosopher and professor at Columbia University. He wrote The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age (1940) to serve as the textbook for a class on Contemporary Civilization at Columbia. The following is excerpted from ch. 2.

Before examining in more detail the medieval beliefs about the scene of human life and its goal and purpose, it is important to remember the great gulf that existed between the ideas of the average man and of those who were conversant with the best [21] available knowledge. Such a gulf always exists, and in spite of our elaborate school systems is perhaps as great to-day as ever; but several circumstances made it at least superficially wider in the Middle Ages. The vast majority of men were rude, hardworking agricultural laborers, who had never been outside their native valley save on some fighting expedition with their lord. Quite unable to read, and with no books or manuscripts available for them had they been able, they were forced to depend upon the hearsay reports of pilgrims or merchants for all they knew of the outside world. Practically their only contact with any knowledge whatsoever was the village priest; and of all the clerics it was precisely these who were themselves least educated and least able to teach. They were both too busy and too poor to pore over manuscripts, and they were despised by the higher and educated prelates and the monks alike. The familiarity which practically every farmer or factory worker has to-day with events and sometimes the outside of ideas through newspapers, magazines, and moving pictures, to say nothing of schooling, had no substitute six hundred years ago. Moreover, even the educated class was proportionately much smaller than it is today; for though we read of thousands attending the universities of Paris and Bologna, until the fourteenth century the large and important universities numbered scarcely a dozen. Nearly all were of the clergy, though this order included what to-day would be the political, legal, and teaching professions; that is, they were set apart from the rest of the community, mingling little with it, and thoroughly committed to the pastoral belief that learning was their special province, not to be entered upon by the laity without dangerous consequences. The fact that all books pretending to scholarship, and most documents, were in the Latin tongue, unintelligible to the mass of even the Italian people, was but an additional mark of this

divergence of function. The Bible itself, so basic for the whole of medieval life, was available only in the Latin Vulgate of Saint Jerome; its translation into the vernacular was the forerunner of the Reformation, and was one of the chief counts against the early reformers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Wyclif and Hus. Until the coming of the mendicant friars, the Dominicans and the Franciscans, in the beginning of the thirteenth century, there was in most lands little preaching that the masses could understand [22] much of the popularity of these orders was due to their missions to the people and their willingness to share their knowledge with all.

The upper classes, of course, were not entirely cut off from the available store of learning. During the later Middle Ages the feudal lords could read and write, after a fashion, and for their amusement there developed a great body of romances and songs, fascinating tales of travel and adventure, which furnishes the glory of the early literature of every European country. The wealthy burghers of the towns also were fairly well educated; indeed, it was probably among the scions of the merchant families, the municipal secretaries and officials required by complex commercial life, that the only really profound lay learning was to be discovered. Dante of Florence, son of a notary, represents this town culture as it flourished in the busy cities of northern Italy in the thirteenth century, and a similar class existed in Germany, France, and Flanders. It was among these men that the newly discovered literatures of antiquity first found enthusiasts: they were the original humanists of the Renaissance. For this reading public there early developed a large literature of popular science that mixed pleasure with edification, and naturally ran to the marvelous and the strange. But the widely read *Romaunt of the Rose*, translated into many tongues, by Chaucer into English; the *Image of the World*, the *Romance of Sidrach*, the *Treasure of Dante's master Bruneto Latini*, the *Properties of Things* of Bartholomew the Englishman, and their many imitators, are really no closer to the best scientific knowledge of the day than are the many magazines of "popular science" of the present. Compared with the sanity and the wisdom of the great encyclopedias of Albert the Great or Saint Thomas, they smack of the ventures of the contemporary pseudo-scientific journalist. [...]