

Medieval Values

Jacques Le Goff

The medieval world was permeated by certain values that colored how people tended to think about the world and to behave in society. Here generalizations are difficult, and in analyzing values scholars often have difficulty leaving their own values aside. In the following selection Jacques Le Goff, a well-known French medievalist, analyzes the fundamental values with which men of the Middle Ages thought, acted, and lived. Here he focuses on their social and political concerns, above all hierarchy, authority, rebellion, and liberty.

Consider: What exactly these medieval values were and how they fit together; what "justice" might mean to medieval men; how one's social station might relate to these values.

... [M]en of the Middle Ages thought, acted, and lived with several fundamental values. ...

Hierarchy: The duty of medieval man was to remain where God had placed him. ~~Rising in society was a sign of pride; demotion was a shameful sin.~~ The organization of society that God had ordained was to be respected, and it was based on the principle of hierarchy. Earthly society, modeled on celestial society, was to reproduce the hierarchy of the angels and the archangels. ...

Authority and Authorities: On the social and political levels, medieval man had to obey his superiors, who were prelates if he was a cleric, the king, the lord, the city fathers, or community leaders if he was a layman. ~~On the intellectual and mental level he had to show loyalty to the authorities, the first of which was the Bible, followed by authorities imposed by historical Christianity: the Fathers of the church in late antiquity, the university magistri in the age of the universities in and after the thirteenth century.~~ The abstract and superior value of *auctoritas*, of authority, inherited from classical antiquity, was imposed upon him, embodied in a great number of different "authorities." The greatest intellectual and social virtue required of medieval man was obedience, justified by religion.

The Rebel: Nevertheless (increasingly after the year 1000, and again after the thirteenth century), a growing number of medieval men refused to accept unchallenged the domination of hierarchical superiors and authorities. For a long time, the principal form of

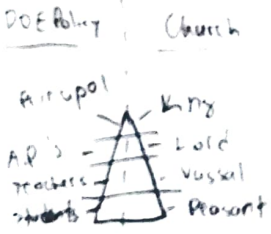
contestation and rebellion was religious: it was heresy. Within the framework of feudalism, it then took the form of the revolt of the vassal against the lord when the latter abused his power or neglected his duties. In the university context contestation was intellectual. Social revolt finally arrived to both city and countryside in the forms of strikes, riots, and workers' and peasants' revolts. The great century for revolt was the fourteenth, from England and Flanders to Tuscany and Rome. When necessary, medieval man had learned how to become a rebel.

Liberty and Liberties. Liberty was one of medieval man's time-honored values. It motivated his principal revolts. The church, paradoxically, gave the signal, as it was under the banner of *Libertas Ecclesiae*—the freedom of the church—that the church, the pope at its head, demanded its independence from a lay world that had subjugated it through feudalization. From the mid-eleventh century, liberty was the password of the great movement for reform begun under Gregory the Great.

Later, aware of their strength and eager to sweep away obstacles to the great surge that had begun with the year 1000, peasants and new city-dwellers demanded and obtained freedom, or, more often, freedoms. The enfranchisement of the serfs corresponded to the concession of charters or liberties to the burghers of the towns and cities. These were above all freedoms (in the plural)—liberties that were actually privileges.

Who was the ultimate force on Earth?
How does this reflect the power of kings?

How was society organized?



Why did people rebel and try to overthrow authority?

How could people war really achieve liberty & freedom?