

MEDIEVAL SYNTHESIS

Connie M. Stewart

Connie M. Stewart, a freshman psychology major, responded to the following take-home exam question in her General Education World History class:

The term "Medieval Synthesis" refers to a perceived inclination in Eurasia roughly during the period 500-1500 A.D. to create large-scale, stable civilizations which were capable of absorbing and neutralizing a great many heterogeneous elements. To what extent do you find this to be a useful term in seeking to understand this millennium over the breadth of the entire continent? How would you define it? Can you give examples from Europe, Asia, and Central Asia to support the validity of this concept? Are there examples and instances which do not fit the concept? Do they render it invalid, or do they exist, rather, as the inevitable exceptions to the rule?

The sources she used are: Reilly, Kevin. Readings in World Civilizations, vol 1, 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992; Stavrianos, L.S. A Global History from Prehistory to the Present. NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991.

Medieval Synthesis" can best be described as the bonding and integration of heterogeneous aspects from previously separated cultures into one society. "Medieval Synthesis" is an appropriate term to describe the actions taken by groups across Eurasia during the millennium which ranged from 500 to 1500 A.D. Examples of these actions can be found in the following places: Confucian China, the Islamic Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Mongol Empire, and Medieval Europe in the time period from the eleventh century to the thirteenth century. However, instances do occur which contradict this idea of synthesis, and I contend that these occurrences are inevitable exceptions to the rule.

First, traditional Confucian China, during this time period, tried to integrate different cultural aspects into its way of life. In the essay titled, "China, Technology, and Change," Lynda Shaffer describes one aspect of this integration, the Chinese civil service exam. According to Shaffer, the institution of this system made more people able to participate in government, and this is illustrated in the

fact that after the exam system was created, ninety-eight percent of the male population was eligible to serve in government. Shaffer says, that prior to this system, only wealthy aristocrats had been able to become government officials. Logically, the allowance of poor peasants into positions of relative power in government would include more diverse cultural and political viewpoints than the previous aristocratic government would have. Furthermore, in the essay called "The Chinese Civil Service Exam System," Ichisada Mizazaki expresses the fact that when this system was created 1400 years ago, it was designed to allow the emperor to choose advisors and officials based upon qualifications merit. In other words, problems might occur if the aristocrats were poorly qualified to be individuals. In addition, according to L.S. Stavrianos, a Chinese man named Chu Hsi, who lived in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, studied Buddhism and Taoism, as well as Confucianism, and he integrated these three sets of ideas into one cohesive set. Stavrianos states that, after Chu Hsi's death, the Confucian Chinese leaders used Chu Hsi's commentaries along with Confucian texts as the basis for later versions of the Civil Service Exam, and this textual combination ultimately became the official text of China. By using Chu Hsi's ideas, the leadership in China integrated, or synthesized, Buddhism and Taoism into its previously exclusive Confucian ideas. Traditional Confucian China serves as an example of "Medieval Synthesis."

The Islamic Empire also serves as an example of the integration of other cultures between 500 and 1500 A.D. For instance, selections from The Koran in the Reilly text refer to Christians and Jews as people of The Book, and according to The Koran, people of The Book must be respected because they are good men. The Koran, the holy book of the Islamic faith represents the rules by which the Islamic Empire lived. Also, J.J. Saunders's essay titled, "The Civilization of Medieval Islam," expresses the fact that the nations which the Islamic Empire conquered and ruled did not originally speak the same language, but the Muslims spread the Arabic language to all the lands which they conquered. In this way, the Islamic Empire brought many different nations with various tongues together under one universal language. In addition, Saunders states that the Persians in the Islamic Empire took ideas which Christians brought to Islam about Greek thought and combined them with Sanskrit folklore of India. Furthermore, Stavrianos states that the Islamic Empire used the

medical knowledge, which the Greeks had acquired in the classical civilization of approximately 500 B.C., to teach and to treat its entire empire. Thus, the Islamic Empire assimilated ancient Greek thought in their civilization of the seventh century A.D. The Islamic Empire also practiced "Medieval Synthesis."

In addition, the Ottoman Empire of the fifteenth century, which included Arabic, Jewish, Caucasian, and African people, worked to include aspects of other cultures into its own. First, this Empire followed the Sunnic tradition of Islam which calls for everyone to guide his or her own life. This idea is best illustrated in the "Millet System" of government which ruled over people through their respective churches, and these churches were ultimately ruled by the Ottoman Empire. This system brought all the religions together into one cohesive governing body. Also, as the excerpt from C.E. Bosworth's book *The Great Islamic Empire* states, the Ottomans used Janissaries, or well trained fighting troops hailing from the Balkans, as a means of "tapping the manpower of the Balkans," (p. 284). Janissaries served as an integrating force because they were Balkan Christians, not elite wealthy Muslims, and this meant people who were not Islamic were conquering and perchance having an influence upon the lands of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire also made efforts to assimilate other cultures into its own.

Furthermore, the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth century worked to bring other cultures' characteristics into its own. According to Stavrianos, the Mongol Empire encouraged all outside religions to establish missions in its borders. For instance, the Mongol Empire traded heavily with the Islamic Empire, and ultimately after conversion to Islam, the Mongol Empire began to conquer lands in the name of Islam. Also, according to Stavrianos, the Mongol ruler named Kublai Khan changed the position of Mongol leader into a Chinese-styled emperorship when he moved his capital city from Karakorum to Peking. In addition, Stavrianos states that Genghis Khan assimilated the weapons of siege, in which the Chinese specialized, into his army's tactics so cities would be more easy to capture. This action brought aspects of Chinese origin into the non-Chinese Mongol society and represents an effort to synthesize a culture. Eventually, as Stavrianos states, the Mongol Empire is shattered by internal cultural assimilation because, unlike other empires, the Mongol Empire did not legitimately possess some unifying characteristics which new cultural aspects could

be blended with. In other words, the Mongol Empire synthesized so much, that it engulfed itself in others' ideas into obscurity. The Mongol Empire also engaged in "Medieval Synthesis."

In addition, Europe in the time period from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries, worked to create a "Medieval Synthesis." According to Stavrianos, Europeans used The Crusades to spread Christianity overseas, in an effort to make it the universal religion it was thought to be. For instance, Christians regained former lands of the Islamic Empire, such as Spain, in order to unify it with the other Christian nations of Europe. In addition, Stavrianos states that the Holy "Roman" Emperor or the Pope strove to create not only a unified Christian Empire, but he also sought to make it a unified Latin empire, since this was the language of the Catholic Church. Once Catholicism was spread to all of these lands, churches were built everywhere, and due to the fact that all of these churches were similar, Gothic architecture was present across Europe. Another example of cultural integration is mentioned by Stavrianos. He states that in the twelfth century, the Catholic Church started universities which taught liberal arts, commerce, civil law and medicine in addition to religious laws. These new universities represent a view of scholasticism, or the study of the Bible along with other works by people such as Aristotle, and scholasticism represents a combination of faith and reason. Furthermore, Stavrianos states that travelers to Asia such as Marco Polo tried to bring treasures of the Orient back home to Europe. Lastly, in the Reilly text, an excerpt called "Just War and Just Price," from *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas, uses The Bible and secular works to discuss points of moral ethics. Aquinas discusses selling for profit by quoting Matthew from The Bible, but he also quotes Cicero in a discussion of the same point. Aquinas, a famous theologian of this period, serves as another example of the ways which Europeans used to create a cultural synthesis. Europeans between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries made efforts to assimilate other cultures.

Some instances and events in the time period between 500 and 1500 A.D. do not support the idea of "Medieval Synthesis." First of all, the Magna Carta of 1215 represents more of a legal reform of the existing culture in England than an assimilation of other cultures. The first paragraph of the Magna Carta clearly stipulates all of the parties involved-- King John of England, Bishops, Earls,

Barons, and Sheriffs-- and lists the locales of these respective individuals. None of the locations listed are outside the kingdom of England. Another example which goes against the idea of assimilation of other cultures was mentioned by Stavrianos, and he states that city-states in Europe organized into powerful defense conglomerates, such as the Hanseatic League, in order to prevent outsiders from coming into the respective league's territory. Lastly, Stavrianos mentions that the Mongol Empire deliberately rejected much of China's religion and culture in order to separate themselves from China. These exceptions to the idea of "Medieval Synthesis" exist as the inevitable exceptions to the rule, and I believe that this is true because the amount of assimilation taking place during Medieval times far exceeded the amount of separation and non-assimilation that took place in the same period. In addition, these separatist activities took place in the Mongol Empire and in Europe where much effort was made to synthesize society into a great whole. The exceptions to "Medieval Synthesis" are inevitable exceptions to the rule.

The term "Medieval Synthesis" can appropriately be used to describe activities by cultures throughout Eurasia in the time period from 500 to 1500 A.D. Cultures that took part in this activity included the following: Confucian China, Islamic Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Mongol Empire, and Medieval Europe between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Contradictions to these synthesizing activities are few, and thus represent inevitable exceptions to the rule.

"A WALK IN THE SUNSHINE": CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE END OF THE SOUTHERN DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Susan J. Roth

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The Presidential election of 1948 was a significant event in the history of the American civil rights movement not only in that for the first time, civil rights took its place among "respectable" political concerns,¹ but in that it transformed the Democratic party. From the era preceding the Civil War, the Democratic party was identified primarily as the party of the South. The party's identification with southern tradition, states rights, and white supremacy were similarly entrenched. The African American, only nationally enfranchised since Reconstruction, had little if any place in the Democratic party. As a result, for the remainder of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the black voter, when he could vote without obstruction, was more than likely to vote with the grand old party of Abraham Lincoln, the Republican party.²

The Democratic party ideology was slow to change in regard to race and race relations, and this intransigence usually reflected itself in the officeholders the party elected. Grover Cleveland, the first post-Civil War Democratic President, was the surprising exception, as displayed by his appointment of blacks to federal posts and reception of Frederick Douglass at the White House. If Cleveland had raised new hopes among blacks for the Democratic party, Woodrow Wilson (for whom some black leaders had actively campaigned) proceeded to crush them. Wilson, a Southerner at heart, made no move to end

¹ Harvard Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election in 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," *Journal of Southern History* 37 (Nov. 1971): 615.
² Henry Lee Moon, *Balance of Power: The Negro Vote* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1948), 87-90.