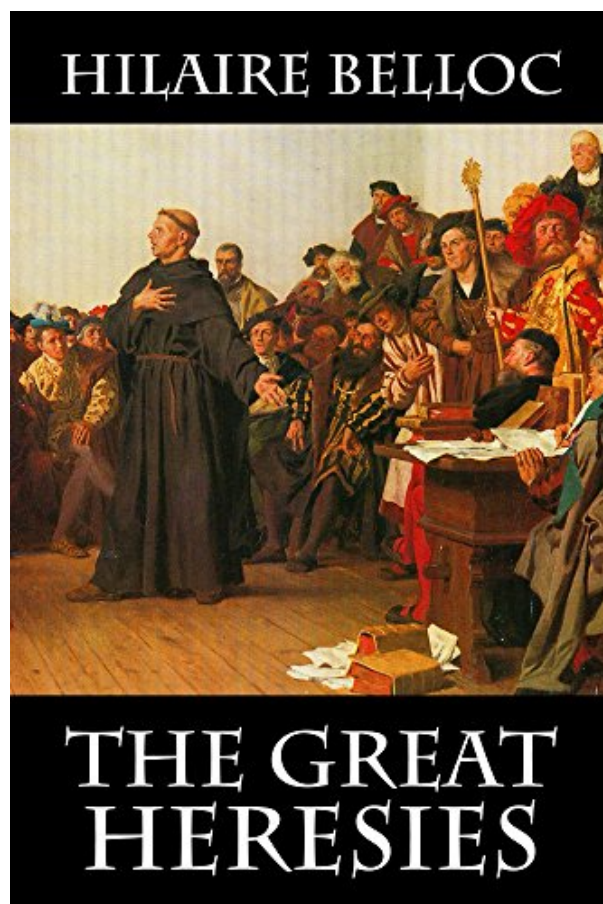


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Hilaire Belloc examines the five most destructive heretical movements to have affected Christian Civilization: Arianism, Mohammedanism (Islam), Albigensianism (Cathar), The Reformation (Protestant), and "The Modern Phase." Belloc describes how these movements began, how they spread, and how they continued to influence the world up until the time of his writing (1936). The Chapter on Islam is especially relevant in light of current events; in it Belloc accurately predicts the renewal of Jihadist aggression towards Western Civilization.

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Must Read

By Brad Shorr

Belloc has an amazing ability to discern general principles from a complex set of facts. He puts it to good use in analyzing the five major heresies that have thwarted the Catholic Church—all of which are socially, politically, and theologically complicated matters spanning centuries.

Conciseness is another of his writing attributes. In a scant 160 pages, Belloc manages to fully probe Arianism, Islam, Albigensianism, the Reformation, and what he calls the "modern" heresy, which at that time had no name but contains elements of what today we might call scientific determinism, humanism, secular humanism, skepticism, or moral relativism.

I found the discussion of Islam particularly valuable. Prior to reading this, I had no idea how Islam spread so quickly, why so enduringly, and how it differed theologically from Christianity. I was struck by how similar the phenomenon of Islam was to the Reformation: both movements liberated converts from oppressive taxation and other financial obligations; both involved a simplification of doctrine that appealed to the masses; both were a reaction against clericalism. Obviously, the movements differed in that Islam attacked Catholicism from the outside, while the Reformation struck from the inside. In Belloc's view, this existence on the fringe of Western culture explains why Islam has endured culturally and spiritually. Ominously, Belloc closes this chapter by asking whether Islam will rise up once more to challenge the West. Prophetically, he answers, "yes". Islam, he maintains, has the virtue of spiritual solidarity, whereas in the West, religion, the very glue of civilization, is dissolving, leaving us irresolute, aimless and vulnerable. A strong political leader in the Islamic world could harness the strength of this spiritually united people and overwhelm us. Pretty relevant ideas, even though written in the 1930's.

No less impressive is Belloc's overview of the Reformation from before Luther to his present day. He traces the movement as seen through the eyes of those who lived through it—an illuminating technique of which Belloc is a master. He makes any number of important points, but the most crucial, in his view, is this: that

the Reformation, by splitting Christendom, diminished the importance of religion to all men. If one religion is as good as another, if no single value system guides the behavior of men, then men will be driven by other things-acquisition of wealth, pleasure, power, what have you. This splitting of Christendom thus paves the way for a new attack-what he calls the Modern Attack-that is wholly anti-religious and seeks nothing less than the utter destruction of faith. We are in the midst of this attack now, and Belloc helps us understand how we got here. Sobering reading indeed

60 of 61 people found the following review helpful.

Review from the Publisher

By A Customer

Here the great Catholic historian Hilaire Belloc analyzes 5 of the greatest heresies of all time: Arianism, Mohammedanism (Islam), Albigensianism, Protestantism, and "the Modern Attack," showing that the world would be vastly different today if Arianism or Albigensianism had survived--and how it is different because Protestantism survived. He predicts the re-emergence of Islam; explains how the Modern Attack is the worst threat to the Catholic Church ever. Gives a keen understanding of the direction of history--as we are living it today!

44 of 45 people found the following review helpful.

The Great Heresies

By zonaras

The Great Heresies by the notable Catholic historian Hilaire Belloc is an outstanding introduction on what constitutes a "heresy" and the threats they have posed to the unity of Christendom. Belloc introduces his subject by defining what a heresy is. A heresy is a worldview that affirms certain aspects of Catholicism (and "Catholicism" can be understood as "traditional Christianity" in its Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox forms) but denies certain absolutely crucial doctrines of the Catholic Christian faith. The cover features a portrait of John Calvin, one of Christendom's chief heresiarchs in a characteristically Mephistophelian light. Belloc examines five of the largest, broadest and most influential heresies that have confronted the Church: Arianism, Mohammedanism (Islam), Albigensianism, Protestantism and what Belloc terms the "Modern Attack" which may in fact be, or is the precursor to, the Spirit of Antichrist. Arianism arose during the power politics of the Roman Empire and was generally supported by the upper-class elements in the Roman Army and the Imperial governing bureaucracy. It was easier more appealing on a philosophic level because the preacher Arius exalted Jesus as the greatest creature of God yet denied the actual Divinity of Christ. Belloc speculates that varying strains of Arianism provided a catalyst for the Nestorian and Monophysite schisms in the Church during the 5th century in the context of anti-Imperial political causes among the Christians of the East. The Arian heresy eventually died out at the same time Islam threatened both Eastern and Western boundaries of Christian Europe. Islam began, according to Belloc, as a heretical doctrine preached to its originally pagan Arab audience rather than as a new religion in itself. Mohammed affirmed the Catholic attributes of a creator God, the Virgin Birth, the prophetic legacy of Jesus and the Last Judgement where Jesus would return to judge good and evil. However, Mohammed totally disavowed the Incarnation of Christ, the tradition of the Apostles and the Church's sacraments that Christ instituted. Islam found a ready audience in the Middle East disenchanted with Byzantine rule and nearly gobbled up both Western and Eastern Christendom by sheer fanaticism and military prowess had it not been for the Spanish re-conquest and the Crusades. Belloc notes the many strengths of Islamic society and (writing in 1938) predicts a resurgence of radical Islam again assaulting the West. Albigensianism was a movement popular in southern France among nobles who were disenchanted with the structure of the Catholic Church. The "Albigensies" were named after a region in France, and the heresy consisted of a radical anti-institutional attitude toward the Church. Basing their philosophy on ancient cosmologies imported from the East, these heretics abandoned marriage, the Church's sacraments and believed in the equality authority of women and men officially preaching the Gospel message. They were eventually destroyed in a French-Papal crusade that assured the development of a united Catholic France. The Protestant attack's most perilous fruits were the

denial of a united, authoritative Church, the doctrine of predestination and the denial of free will and of course the idea that material wealth was a sign of God's blessing. Belloc calls Calvin's theology that of a "Moloch God" who predestines souls to heaven and hell indefinitely before linear time began. However, Calvin's tremendous historical influence has been shown by the uplifting of the traditional Catholic ban on usury and an increasing control of individual life and property by both private (capitalist) and government (socialist/communist) interests. Catholic and Protestant Europe came to blows against each during the 17th century and neither side gained ascendancy. Catholic Europe gradually fell behind Protestant Europe in the eighteenth century except for Napoleon's brief conquests after 1800. Protestant Europe, especially Britain and Prussia, greatly expanded their power in the 19th century but by the early 20th century both the Catholic and Protestant regions of Europe had completely exhausted themselves. Since Protestantism has collapsed in much the way Catholicism is now struggling to survive, Belloc's "Modern Attack" has come to the fore. Belloc devotes only a handful of pages to the Modern Attack and does not go into very many details about what and whom it constitutes. Modernism in its broadest definition encompasses a plethora of different political movements, philosophies, ideologies, superstitions and pseudo-religions, but is basically the denial of God's existence as a transcendent Being independent of humanity and the material world. According to Modernism, man created God in order to deal with complex problems of life that had no material ("scientific" or "rational") solution at primitive stages in human evolution and therefore what God actually exists is merely a quaint figment of our imaginations. Belloc notes that there can be no peace or tolerance between the Catholic position and that of the Modern Attack. Either the Church will be swallowed up until something as small as "the Pope and the twelve apostles" (better put if Belloc simply said "the twelve apostles") remain or the Church reemerges triumphant as it had in the past. Belloc concludes his survey in an optimistic rather than pessimistic light. Even if the Church shrinks to an obscure sect invisible, ignored and frequently ridiculed in the neo-pagan society arising, it can never be destroyed and it will always remain a witness to the Truth until Christ returns.

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