4. The Rise of Western Civilisation

The term ‘Western Civilisation’ is used in this book as a convenient label for the early stages of the civilisation to which we belong. The prefix ‘Western’ is not intended to be narrowly topographical or ideological, but refers to the Western European heartland, around the western Mediterranean and Atlantic seaboard, in which this civilisation arose. It also indicates a historical affinity with the territory of the Western Roman Empire, over against the more wealthy Eastern Empire centred upon Constantinople and the eastern Mediterranean. This Eastern Empire survived as ‘Byzantium’ until the fifteenth century, and when it collapsed there were other civilisations to the east which justified the continuance of the concept of a distinct ‘western’ civilisation. Only in the last two centuries, with the rapid industrialisation and world-ascendancy of our civilisation, has it become potentially ambiguous to describe it as ‘western’. Modern China, Japan, and India, have all been profoundly influenced by Western Civilisation, and particularly by its techniques of industrialisation, so that the geographical antithesis between east and west has ceased to have any significance in this respect. So we switch to the usage ‘Industrial Civilisation’ to describe this most recent period, in order to suggest the greatly increased scope of our civilisation. But there is an essential continuity between the ‘Western’ and ‘Industrial’ phases of our civilisation, which will be apparent in this and the following chapters. Our civilisation has had about a thousand years of uninterrupted development, and in this chapter we will be concerned with the first half of this period, from about AD 1000 to 1500. During this period Western Civilisation acquired a self-conscious identity and evolved through a long process of more or less isolated growth. There were slight external influences, as we will see, but for the most part Western Civilisation was allowed to consolidate and become self-confident without major challenges from outside.
Our aim will be to isolate the main trends in this process of social evolution: to study, that is, the internal dynamics of our own civilisation in the early stages of its development.

The Origins

The roots of Western Civilisation must be sought in the so-called ‘Dark Ages’, when the western Roman Empire had crumbled away and been replaced by a comparatively primitive tribal system. This period of some six centuries was ‘dark’ in the sense that the lights of civilised life – urbanisation, specialisation, literacy, and so on – had been extinguished, and existence for most people had reverted to a struggle for subsistence. The period is also ‘dark’ in the sense that the paucity of written records makes our knowledge of it far less complete than that for the Roman Empire before it or for the new civilisation which followed it. Yet the period was not one entirely of loss. During these six centuries our civilisation established its distinctive racial and linguistic patterns, and there occurred that fusion between the tribal culture of the ‘barbarians’ and the traditions of the Christian Church and of Roman Law which has been of such great significance in the history of the world.

The economic and political organisation of Western Europe during this seminal period from the fall of Rome to Alaric in AD 410 to the last of the Viking incursions in the eleventh century can be summed up in the word ‘feudalism’. The term has been used in a number of different ways: to denote particular legal relationships and forms of land tenure, amongst other things. It is being used here in a general rather than a particular sense, to represent a self-sufficient, small-scale, agrarian society. Thus a feudal society is one which supports itself militarily and economically. It provides its own food by the cultivation of the land; it provides its own clothing, tools, and services; and it provides for its own defence. Each such society is in effect an independent feudal state, and Western Europe was splintered into a myriad states of this type by the barbarian invasions. Being self-supporting, each state carried on little trade with its neighbours. It had little need for money, as internal exchanges could be fairly easily conducted by barter. Towns were virtually eliminated, the only exceptions being military encampments at strategic points which occasionally, at convenient places, gave protection to a small