

Let us now proceed to examine into another tradition, which has even a stronger hold, if possible, than the one of which I have been speaking, upon the credulity of those who accept both with an unquestioning faith. I mean the tradition respecting the condition and influence of the Papacy during the middle ages. I do not think I exaggerate when I say that the ordinary, common, every-day-belief of those among whom these traditions are rife, is that at the beginning of the sixteenth century the state of Europe was lamentable in the extreme;—that religion had well nigh died out of the world;—that ignorance and violence abounded; and that (and this is the point) the Papacy was largely to blame for the miserable condition of affairs;—Rome was a centre of profligacy and corruption, and the Popes were among the vilest of mankind. Briefly, this is what is called by those who hold it, the orthodox view; and you are looked upon as either ignorant or disingenuous, if you question the faithfulness of the picture.

Now, in the first place, I venture on general grounds, to differ from those who hold these extreme views as to the 'darkness' of the middle ages.⁴ I question very much if our ancestors were so far behind us as is commonly supposed. We form our opinions of them from history, and our histories as a rule, are greatly abridged, being largely a record of sieges and battles, murders and court intrigues, and popular discontents, and such like. According to them, people in past times seem to have been doing little else than killing each other. When we put down our book, we do not always reflect that our guide, in order to survey the course of centuries in a few pages, necessarily has had to confine himself to recording only the great and exceptional events of those times. The historian dwells on these things, because they are dramatically interesting, but if we want to ascertain what manner of men our forefathers were, and how they thought, and worshipped

4. The term 'Middle Ages' is here used in its loose, conventional sense as including the 16th century.