

The Religious Life During the Middle Ages: The Ups and Downs of Religion

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Abstract: With the establishment of the church, which was dominant throughout this period, the Middle Ages saw a lot of religious conflicts. At the beginning of the Renaissance, this gradually led to the church's decline. This paper seeks to take a deep dive into the three periods of the Middle Age -- the Early, High, and Late Middle Ages. Each period characterises by its own features in the religious context. The main role, however, is played by the Catholic Church. It was a dominant force in the Early to High Middle Ages before its decline in the Late Middle Ages. People's daily lives in the Middle Ages revolved heavily around the church. In the High Middle Ages, the church was well-established. This period also saw the rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary, which was an embodiment of the ideal woman. While the church-maintained control over the people in the early years of the late Middle Ages, the masses gradually began to revolt. Peasants continued to practise their traditional practices and were taught prayers in languages they did not understand. Naturally, they felt compelled to adhere to their old beliefs, which Christianity did not recognise. Several reformers, like Wycliffe and Luther, prepared the stage for the scepticism of the church to finally take root. The Black Death pandemic increased the church's difficulties and ultimately contributed to its demise. Luther is regarded as the forerunner of the Protestant movement that led to the reformation. His criticism of the church as the intermediary between people and God posed a significant challenge.

1. Introduction

The Middle Ages is a period in European history following the fall of the Roman Empire. Its beginning is marked from the 5th Century all the way up to the Renaissance period, which varies with its beginning time frame between the 13th and 15th Centuries depending on several factors [1].

The Catholic Church widely dominated religion at the time. However, before we take a look at religion, we must first be clear about the dimensions of this period. Following the fall of the Roman Empire is what began what we know as the Early Middle Ages. There was great significance in cultural, social, and political structures here. This is also when the shift in religion began towards Christianity, as the majority of the population was Christianized. The Central or High and Late Middle Ages saw more economical and political shifts as well as a decline, after which began the period of Renaissance.

The Middle Ages saw a lot of conflict in religion with the establishment of the church, which was predominant throughout this period. However, many of its mandates were challenged later, leading to an uproar among the people. Gradually, this led to the decline of the church -- with some of its ideals still prevalent -- with the beginning of the Renaissance.

2. The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church was one of the dominant forces in the early to high Middle Ages. A majority of Europe had converted to Christianity by the beginning of the 11th Century. The Pope was the autocratic head of the state [2]. The church was an important part of politics and was bound together. Either of the two parties ensured the reinforcement of the other's authority. The church had enough power to monitor a person's life, assuming it even had control over their soul after death. It had such a strong foothold that its decrees and dictates were never challenged [3]. According to belief, it was thought that God himself gave the church its authority. This was thought to have been done by Jesus

Christ, who is regarded as the apostle Peter, the first Pope. The successors were designated with the same authority [4].

People's daily life in the Middle Ages revolved heavily around the church, right from the nitty-gritty. People supported the church by giving a tithe of 10 percent of their income; the church had to pay no taxes. As mentioned above, the teachings had no room for questioning and had to be adhered to, which would not be endured. With immense power, there was a presence of corruption. The church was highly influential and extremely wealthy, which gave them enough authority to threaten the nobles, political authorities other than the church, etc.

While the church saw some form of dominance, there was clear unrest among the masses. Known figures like John Wycliffe and Martin Luther criticized the church's actions and, as a result, were condemned by the Pope. Luther's contribution to the reformation was what broke the dominance of the church and paved the way for reformers from across the world to follow suit. This new era was strong enough to break the church's strong, unwavering monopoly. The reformation movement, while successfully overthrowing the church's oppressions, left its trail of devastation.

3. Paganism in the Early Middle Ages

Even with the dominance of Christianity, Paganism prevailed (even if by a little) all throughout the Middle Ages. Not everyone accepted being Christianized with open arms. Pagans believed in nature, the cycles of nature and everything encompassing life and death that existed in the world. They relied heavily on spiritual ideologies and were in touch with natural objects, such as trees, plants, animals, etc. What we know of today as "pagans" came from the rural countryside and still had beliefs in folk magic and other older practices even after the acceptance of Christianity in the urban areas. The majority of these pagans were peasants who followed practices that included fortune-telling, astrology, charms, belief in talismans and such.

Some beliefs, such as the existence of fairies and ghosts, and their appeasement, persisted even after the church explicitly forbade any communication with such entities [5]. In some cases, pagan practices were being followed alongside going to church and following the dictates of said institution. However, the stronger the establishment of the church grew, the weaker the presence of paganism grew. Eventually, it led to the decline in the practice of paganism until later in the Late Middle Ages when individuals belonging to the peasant class especially reverted to their old practices.

4. Religion in the High Middle Ages

By this time, the church has established itself as an authority figure of great value. Everything known about beliefs comes from official records of the church. So, many of those who were illiterate, like peasants, had their beliefs and such accounted for through the church's eyes [6].

During the reign of the church, women were especially seen as quite inferior. To the church, there were given two embodiments of a woman. In this context, the mother of Jesus Christ, Mary, was considered the ideal woman. She harboured the qualities of purity, a woman free from sins, resisting temptations and a perfect mother, which gave rise to the Cult of Mary.

Both men and women would pray to the Virgin Mary, which held in high esteem. For instance, the feasts that held in her honour celebrated with flowers such as irises and marigolds associated with Jesus [7]. There were countless shrines dedicated to her, which would be seen in temples and other places of worship as well as shrines on the road.

Not only did this serve as a model for how a woman should walk, but the church also used it to teach people how to be good Christians. It is, however, important to note that Jesus's mother, the Virgin Mary, was not the only one we should look at. Mary of Bethany, Mary, who was the wife of Clopas, Mary, who was the mother of James and Joseph, and Mary Magdalene, especially, were also notable figures.

5. The Protestant Reformation of the Late Middle Ages

While in the initial years of the Late Middle Ages, the church still held regulation over people, little by little, uproar amongst the masses started to take place. The church at the time would bestow priests to punish any form of rebellion against its dictates, especially those towards opposing religious sects.

Peasants still followed their initial folk practices and were taught prayers in languages they did not understand. Naturally, they felt more compelled to follow their old beliefs, which were not accepted in Christianity. The parish priests and clergy, who were rather respected, followed through with punishing the heretical sects. They especially adhered to this because of the amount of respect they received. The added fact of the church being corrupt also played a big role. All this had very little significance to play in the lives of the peasants. Thus, the church wanting to bring the peasantry in line with orthodoxy, resulted in heterodox practices like paganism and everything encompassing it.

In England, it began with Henry VIII rejecting the authority of the Pope and establishing his monopoly over the church of England with a mix of ideals from the church run by the Pope and the Protestants [8]. This followed an era of chaos in the context of religion, with the shift going back and forth between Christianity and the Catholic Church and Protestant ideals. This later led to the division of groups into Puritans and Separatists, who had very opposing views. Thus, there was a wide diversity in religion, religious beliefs, and conflicts in religion within the expanse of the Middle Ages.

Luther is regarded as the forerunner of the protestant movement that gave rise to the reformation. His criticism of the church as the mediator between the people and God posed a great challenge [8]. His challenges, especially regarding the indulgence system, gave rise to the uprising against the church. Similar trends are also followed in different regions, led by different notable figures like John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli in France and Switzerland. The main idea revolved around the notion that people should turn directly towards God for prayers, salvation, etc., and not rely on the church. It was more about the idea of taking personal responsibility for religion than leaving it to an institution that deemed itself to be a medium.

6. Conclusion

The mediaeval ages saw the authority of the Orthodox Church and, towards the end, gradually saw its downfall. Whereas the higher classes did get their own set of benefits, it was the lower class that often bore the brunt of the church's decrees. The initial reformation against the church received a lot of condemnation, following which the church's monopoly over the citizens of the state faded gradually. Women, too, were on the receiving end. Though participated in as many activities as men, they were considered inferior.

Even though its initial stages were quite strong in their resistance towards the church, Paganism eventually saw its own decline. Following the co-existence of both practices, it eventually receded to the church's being of authority. As a result, the church gained complete control not only over individuals, but also over those in the highest political hierarchies, such as Kings, Knights, and other Nobel laureates. The influence of the Muslims and the Jews was not received positively, with them being considered enemies. While the Jews and Christians had initially friendly relations, factors such as crusades and economic enmities caused a strain in their relationship.

The Reformation, however, was redeemed once the atrocities of the church were not open to being endured. The wake of several reformers like Wycliffe and Luther eventually paved the way for the seed of distrust against the church to be sown. The Black Death pandemic further challenged the capabilities of the church and thus eventually led to its decline. Even though its existence still prevails, to some extent, beliefs today allow for greater freedom and liberty for an individual than they did back in the Middle Ages.

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