

# THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

*The term 'Medieval Times' or 'Middle Ages' was invented by an German historian, Christoph Keller in the seventeenth century. Medieval times referred to a period of roughly 400–600 years, from the tenth century onwards. (Historians disagree as to the exact dates.) During this time many changes occurred; therefore, the label Middle Ages is used only as a convenient way of identifying a time that can be distinguished from other ages in Western history.*

Each historical age can be interesting to study and can give insights into our own time and culture. For anyone studying the story of Christianity, the Middle Ages are of particular importance, because in that time every aspect of life in what we now know as Europe was influenced by the Christian Church.

## BACKGROUND

The Middle Ages were for European society a relatively settled period, by comparison with earlier centuries. Even though wars and invasions did not stop completely, there was not the anxiety and profound upheaval that had existed in previous centuries when many 'states' were ravaged by barbarian invasions, Muslim wars and continuous faction (group) fighting. (States as we know them now did not exist as such until some centuries after the Middle Ages.)

There was also a belief that Europe, or Christendom, the domain of Christ, was united by the ideals of the Gospels. And even though the actions of most kings, rulers and others showed little in common with Gospel values there was a sense of

nations united together, that had not existed since the days of the Roman Empire.

This sense of unity was maintained until the sixteenth century when Europe became divided into Catholic and Protestant enclaves (groupings).

## THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF LIFE

Medieval people saw their life on earth as a preparation for life after death. If they lived in accordance with the rules and commandments of the Church, and died 'in the state of grace' (that is, in a right relationship with God – without having sins that had not been forgiven by the sacrament of Penance) – they would be admitted to heaven and everlasting peace and joy. Alternatively, if they had lived a sinful life and died 'in the state of sin,' then the everlasting torments of hell were theirs to endure for all eternity.

## THE WAY TO HEAVEN

Medieval people understood the suffering and the hardships of their lives in terms of *trials to be endured and overcome as a way of proving themselves worthy to enter heaven*. In fact, the more one suffered, the better the chance of being saved.

All aspects of life were seen as either a help or an obstacle to getting to heaven. This attitude may need some explaining because people today, especially people in the industrialised or first world countries, are not subject to the same sort of pressures and situations.

For the majority of people in medieval times, life meant great physical hardship, being threatened by repeated famines, floods, plagues, disease and wars, and being under the control of an overlord or employer. Personal freedom was almost unknown and for the majority of people, and for women of all classes, virtually impossible to obtain. Life expectancy usually did not exceed 40-45 years. It was a commonly held belief that life on earth was meant to be a 'vale of tears'.

Sickness, poverty, hard work and insults were the common lot of most people for their short lives. Old age held very little appeal; as one observer wrote: "The hair falls out, the teeth rot, the breath stinks and so does the whole body".

It was believed that true happiness could only be found in heaven. People's experience of life confirmed this belief. So it was logical that the focus of people's attention became 'other worldly', that is to say, no matter how dreadful life was on earth, people had the possibility of *eternal* happiness in heaven if they led a good and holy life.

### THE TEMPTATIONS OF LIFE

The way to heaven was not easy. It was full of all sorts of perils. It was believed that the temptations of Satan were everywhere. Christians had to be on guard at all times against these evils, some of which were 'real' and took the shape of witches and warlocks who showed their power by making the cattle sick or blighting the crops. Satan and his devils were ever present and tempted people with forbidden pleasures and wrong beliefs (heresies).

It was known that the devil used every trick to lead people into sin; so the Church had to teach people about his power. In paintings on church walls, in stories and sermons, he was shown as a horrible creature with wings and claws surrounded by his equally grotesque followers. But, people were also

warned that demons were able to turn into any form: they could become handsome young men or beautiful women; they could use convincing arguments to tempt people to give up their beliefs, or win the confidence of foolish people; they could even trick a saint. Everyone believed these things – not just uneducated people.

*The Inquisitor's Handbook*, written by Bernard Gui, was for the instruction of clerics and nobles who were generally educated. The text stated that witches and sorcerers used wax or leaden images to help cast spells, gathered herbs on their knees, made people swallow hairs and fingernails, cast spells with fruits and plants, could foretell the future, cure the sick and discover secrets.

The handbook went on to explain that there were people in the community who were used by Satan to help in his evil work. People who were lame, blind, deaf, hunch-backed or deformed in any way could be identified as possible disciples of Satan.

### PAGAN BELIEFS

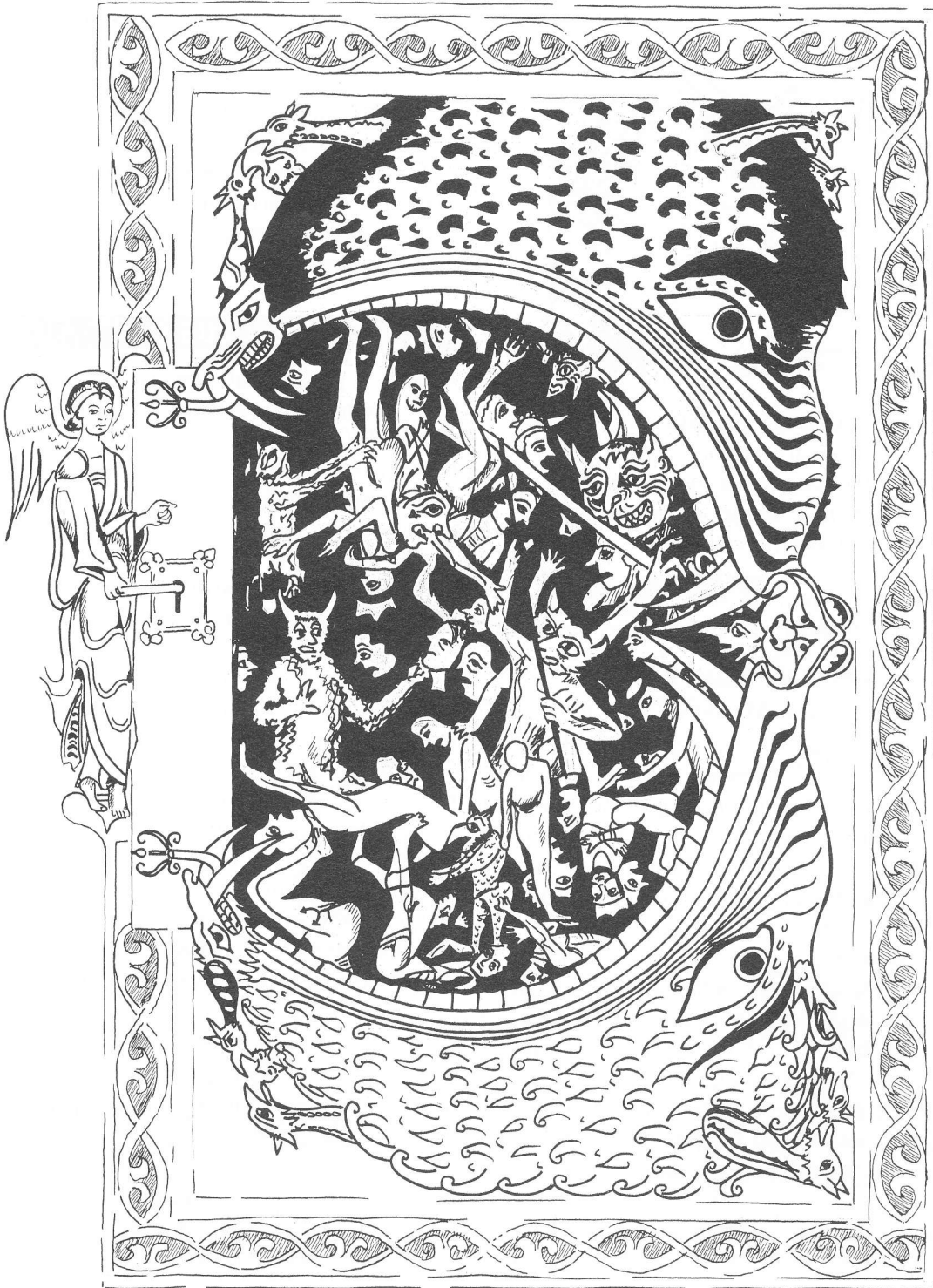
Yet, despite the fear of Satan and his world, old pagan beliefs and rituals, which the Church taught were tools of the devil, still had a strong power and attraction for people.

Some historians believe that holding on to pagan beliefs was one way that poor peasants expressed their latent (beneath the surface) hostility to a Church which was dominated by the rich and powerful in society.

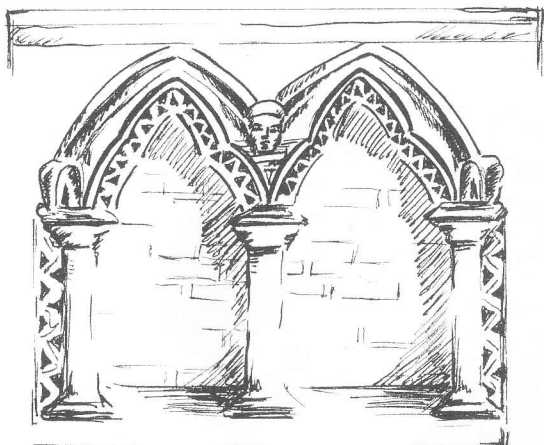
Over the years, Christianity had incorporated pagan rituals into its own rituals and pagan shrines or sacred places were made holy by adding Christian symbols. Some pagan myths and story-tales have come down to us today, stories like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* have elements of pagan myths in them.

It was also believed that famine and disease were sent by God as punishments for all the evil that was being committed on earth.

The possibility of being damned to hell was always close by because death was always present. Children died frequently. It was not unusual for a woman to give birth to about fifteen children and for ten or more



*A Medieval vision of hell showing the damned being swallowed into the abyss and an angel locking them up for ever. British Library Board.*



A *piscina* – a kind of wash basin built into the wall of the sanctuary part of a church. The remains of the consecrated wine and water were emptied into it so they could not be stolen by witches and used for evil purpose.

to die before the age of five. At times, whole families were wiped out by famine, disease or epidemics.

#### THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN GIVING PURPOSE AND MEANING TO LIFE

To help people in such a hostile and fearful world, the Church offered the Sacraments which were to strengthen the faithful at every important stage of their life from birth until death: at birth (Baptism); during adolescence (Confirmation); marriage or Holy Orders to mark maturity; and at death, the Anointing of the Sick.

The faithful could also pray to special saints for help and guidance and to seek favours. People could perform special acts to gain an indulgence. (Christians believed that even when a sin was forgiven by the Sacrament of Penance, some punishment had to be undergone after death. An indulgence, which could be given to them by the Church, had the power to take away that punishment.)

One of the ways to gain an indulgence was to go on a pilgrimage. An indulgence could be plenary (total) or partial according to the rules laid down by the Church. Other ways of gaining indulgences were to do charitable works, looking after the sick, feeding

the hungry, visiting prisoners, giving shelter to the homeless, burying the dead, giving clothing to the destitute (very poor and homeless). Other ways were to practise humility and deny oneself pleasures and easy living and give gifts to the Church.

Some scholars say that it was the belief in heaven which gave dignity and purpose to people's lives at times when all the forces of devastation and gloom must have seemed to be against them.

#### CONCLUSION

*Trying to understand how medieval people perceived meaning and purpose for their lives should help us analyse how we, in a very different age, understand what we believe to be our purpose in life. Some Church writers maintain that religion no longer has such a strong place in our society because we can see that 'a good life' is possible on earth, for most of us, (especially in the Western countries) so we do not have to wait to get to heaven to have a 'good life'. We no longer believe in witches and warlocks and our understanding of religion is, in general, more educated.*

*We are also aware that there are other religions and people who do not have religious beliefs who explain the meaning of life in different ways. Our whole experience of life affects our attitudes.*

*Seeing how a very different age understood the role played by religion in their lives may help us to work out what role religion plays in our lives.*

#### ENDNOTE

It was during the Middle Ages that many rituals, institutions and Church practices were developed. In the Roman Catholic Church and some other Christian churches, these things, – like vestments, hymns, ceremonies – remained virtually unchanged until the 1960s. Most large cathedrals are modelled on the Gothic style of buildings which were characteristic of the Middle Ages.

Institutions such as universities, banks and guilds

for craftsmen (which were forerunners of our modern professional associations), were founded and developed in the Middle Ages. In addition, there were the beginnings of what we now would consider fundamental rights for all people: trial by jury; election of representatives for government.

These practices were used in a very restricted way in the Middle Ages, but, nonetheless, they were the beginnings of basic freedoms. Although the day-to-day life of most Medieval people was brutal and harsh, there were many scholars who wrote and taught about peace among all peoples and who proclaimed the equality of all before God, whether they were a king or an artisan – a skilled worker like a woodcarver or a shoemaker.

This was of very little comfort to the poor peasant who had no real rights before his master who controlled every aspect of his life – where he lived,

whom he could marry and how much he earned. Ideals of equality for all were ignored by virtually all in power. But it was important to articulate these ideals and to strive for them.

*To give a sense of what the Middle Ages were like and how people lived, the units of work that follow examine the Parish Church and Community; how the Church authorities dealt with Christians who were involved in heretical movements; the way that society and the Church tried to explain and cope with a catastrophic epidemic, the Black Death; how Christians prayed and participated in rituals such as pilgrimages; the role of women in the Church; and the power and place of the Papacy in the Middle Ages.*



*Salisbury Cathedral, England*

*When this cathedral was first built its spire could be seen for miles. Why do you think cathedrals had such high towers?*