7.8 Medieval England

RELIGION AND POWER

During the Middle Ages in Europe, the Christian Church was very powerful. The Church and religion influenced almost every part of a person’s life.

How did Christianity spread through Europe?
Christianity started about 2000 years ago and is based on the teachings of Jesus, who lived in Galilee during the time of the Roman Empire. Christianity was spread by Jesus's followers, who travelled to many parts of the empire and set up churches. Christians did not believe that the emperor was a god, so Christianity became illegal and many Christians were put to death. This did not stop the early Christians from practising their faith in secret. During the rule of Emperor Constantine, Christianity was allowed to be practised. In AD 391 it became the official religion of the empire. From this time on the power and influence of the Christian Church began to grow and spread. People such as St Patrick, who converted most of Ireland to Christianity from AD 450, helped to spread the teachings of the Church. Monks, nuns and friars travelled anywhere to spread their faith and so were very important in spreading Christianity throughout Europe.

Power and functions of the Church
Kings and nobles supported the Church; mainly because it was able to help keep order in society through its rules about people’s behaviour. The Church taught people that their place in society was decided by God. This was called the ‘Order of Being’. The Church educated people, who could in turn help the kings by giving them advice. All Western Europeans were members of the Church, so the head of the Church—the pope—was a very powerful person. He had the power to expel anyone from the Church—even the greatest king. Beneath the pope were cardinals (who elected the pope), bishops, parish priests, monks and nuns.

The parish priest worked in the local church and for most people he was the only representative of the Church that they met. Sometimes a wandering friar would come to the town or village, or there might be a monastery or convent nearby.

By the tenth century the Church performed many functions that today are the responsibility of the government or are done by private businesses. There were Church courts and the Church published books and educated people, cared for the poor and looked after sick people. In some parts of Europe the Church also helped to build and look after roads and bridges. In 1233 in the city of Metz, in Germany, the Bishop ordered that when people died their best clothes had to be sold to help pay for a new bridge. The local church was not just a quiet place for prayer. It was also a place where meetings were held or where games and entertainments were held on holy days.

**HISTORY SKILLS**

**Analysing Artworks**

**Explanation** Artwork provides the historian with a valuable interpretation of either a historical event or scene from the past.

**Procedure**
- Look for the historical period, event or scene being shown
- Note relevant information given with the artwork, such as artist, date or location depicted
- Look for evidence of location and time period
- Identify the message or viewpoint the artist is expressing.
I saw how paradise was made... I saw there trees, leaves, and clover and grass and no weeds. Many trees bore apples but most of them had only leaves and a [beautiful perfume]. Rushing waters flow through that place... In the waters earthly sweetness was mixed with heavenly joy. The air was sweeter than I can say... [Whoever comes into the Kingdom of God will be rid of all sickness.]

... I have seen a place—its name is Eternal Hatred... Lucifer sits in the deepest abyss... In the deepest part of Hell are fire and darkness and stench and horror and all sorts of the greatest torment... The murderers must stand bloodied [in front of Lucifer] and be beaten... with a fiery sword. Those who on earth had [hated people] must [be Lucifer's] smelling salts and [forever hang under] his nose. [The greedy] and drunkard must stand before [him] in everlasting hunger and eat red-hot stones... The [angry] are beaten with fiery whips... how they seethe and roast... how they swim and walk among the worms and filth...

From *The Glowing Light of the Godhead* by Machetiide of Magdeburg. This was written in 1275.
Our word ‘holiday’ comes from the special days such as Christmas or Saints Days, on which people could relax and enjoy themselves.

**Heaven and Hell**

One of the most important beliefs that people held was that after people died their soul would be judged and they would go to either Heaven or Hell and live there for eternity. To enter Heaven, a person must have obeyed the rules of the Church. These rules included being good, but also included going to Church regularly, giving money to the Church and receiving the **sacraments**. The sacraments were special rituals such as baptism, where a child became a member of the Church; Holy Communion, where a person was believed to take the body and blood of Jesus; marriage; holy orders (taken to become a priest, nun or monk); and extreme unction (a special blessing when a person is dying).

To live in Heaven was a paradise; a reward for a good life. Hell was a place of constant pain and suffering. If a person was not good enough to go straight to Heaven, but not bad enough to go to Hell, they might go to **purgatory** to make up for their sins before they could get into Heaven. In the Middle Ages, the Church made a lot of money by selling **indulgences** (money people paid to reduce their stay in purgatory).

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*A modern artist’s reproduction of a medieval drawing showing Kingship and the Church and their role in helping the poor.*

King Louis of France leaving for the Crusades in 1270.
QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. In your workbook, draw a time line that shows the important events in the beginnings of Christianity and how these ideas spread through Europe. For each event, write a short explanation of why that event helps to spread Christian beliefs. Your timeline will need the following headings: event, date, and how it helped to begin or spread Christianity.

2. Look carefully at Sources A and B.
   a. What do you think is happening in Source A?
   b. Why do you think that pictures such as Sources A and B were important for ordinary people to see during the Middle Ages?
   c. What does Source C show you about Christian ideas in regard to what happened to people after they died? Why do you think that Christians held these beliefs?

3. Look carefully at Source B and refer to the text in this unit.
   a. Which three sacraments are shown in Source B?
   b. Which of these sacraments are still important for some people today?
   c. Do you always think of these sacraments in the same way that people thought of them in the Middle Ages? Explain your answer.

4. What If You Were There?
   Imagine that you are a parish priest living in the 1200s in England or western Europe and are preparing a speech for your parishioners (the people who live in your parish) to explain what happens after death. You want to scare them about Hell and convince them to live their lives in a way that will ensure they go to Heaven. Write out the speech that you would give. Use Sources A and C to help you.

5. Using the information in this unit and Source D, describe the importance of the Church in 1270. The unit on the Crusades will also help you.

6. Look carefully at Source E.
   a. What does this source tell you about the way in which the Church and kings were supposed to work together?
   b. How would you find out whether this drawing shows an accurate view of how poor people in the Middle Ages were helped by both the Church and the rulers of countries?

KEY TERMS

- Christianity
- Order of Being
- priest
- friar
- holiday
- sacraments
- Purgatory
- indulgences

HISTORY SKILLS

Constructing a Time Line

Explanation: Draw a time line by drawing a straight line showing a period of time. On the line, show key events in the time order in which they happened. A time line lets us make sense of a story, a series of events or an explanation.

Procedure
- Draw a line.
- Use a scale of one centimetre for a specific time period—for example, to represent 10 or 100 years.
- Mark the line with divisions to show the years you are looking at.
- Unite the important events near the key dates.
- If asked, write a sentence to show why this date is important.