

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 49: Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages

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## Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: Did You Know?

Little-known or remarkable facts about everyday faith in the late Middle Ages

the Editors

Medieval society was seen as composed of three complementary classes. Wrote one, "Some pray, others fight, and still others work"—referring respectively to clergy, knights, and lay people. "These three groups live together and could not survive apart."

The medieval Catholic church accepted a wide range of religious tastes and expressions, which in the modern world might find places in different denominations.

Many medieval churches were owned privately by wealthy laymen, monasteries, or bishops. The owner sold or passed on the property as he wished, and its revenues went into his pocket. He appointed the priest, had him ordained, and paid him. Many owners gave the parish to a priest as a "living," who as "rector," received all or most of the revenues.

The parish rector collected offerings at mass, on the anniversary of a parishioner's death, at weddings and funerals, and from penitents at confession. Offerings might be in kind: bread for Communion, wax and candles, eggs at Easter, fowls at Christmas.

During some periods, church offices were bought and sold openly, and church officials lived sumptuously—"loaded with gold and clad in purple," as one critic put it. Money could buy any kind of dispensation, even for receiving stolen goods. The corruption so angered people, they sometimes ransacked monasteries or killed bishops.

Though priests took a vow of celibacy, many had concubines. The practice was often open and accepted, as long as the priest was faithful to one woman. One chronicler tells about a woman who lived with "a right amorous priest for many years and bore him four sons, three of whom became priests."

The flickering lights of marsh gas were to many people fairies or goblins; fireflies were the souls of unbaptized dead infants. Many thought sorcerers and ghosts manipulated human lives. Astrology was used to explain things. For example, the University of Paris concluded that the bubonic plague of 1340s-50s was due to the conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars.

Since Jews were considered responsible for killing Christ, they were discriminated against. Jews weren't allowed to sell flour, wine, oil, or clothing to Christians. In some places, Jews (along with Moslems, heretics, and prostitutes) were required to wear in public a circular patch of yellow felt.

People were fascinated with Christ's suffering. Many used Bonaventure's advice to better identify with it: "Contemplate the drops of blood, the blows in the face, the persistence of the whip, the crown of thorns, the derision and spitting...." Some people even whipped themselves until they bled.

People often associated in confraternities, charitable and social groups of 20 to 100 members. Among other things, they donated church windows, adopted hospitals, staged religious plays, and held sports competitions. On feast days, they processed with a statue or portrait of their patron saint. They also marched in the burial procession at a member's death; if he died insolvent, they supported the widow

and children.

Though many people strove to earn God's forgiveness by good works, others—even those following the most rigorous religious lifestyle, monasticism—knew salvation is entirely by grace. One Carthusian monk wrote that the "inner goal, to forsake the world and follow Christ, cannot be had by one's own natural powers but is by the free gift of God."

By the 1200s, virtually all Christians were members of a geographically defined parish, each with its own pastor. In fifteenth-century England, there were about 9,500 parishes with 3 million people, an average of roughly 300 men, women, and children per parish.

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## Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: From the Editor - Faith that Filled the Nooks and Crannies

Mark Galli, Editor

We Christians of the closing years of the twentieth century have a lot to complain about.

We complain that modern Christianity is so fractured that we've made a scandal of Jesus' prayer that all his followers be one. Yet there was a time in history when Christianity was one.

We long for political leaders who identify themselves as Christians and try to live by their convictions. Yet there was a time when this was so.

We complain that our society has gone secular, and we yearn and pray that Christian values (rather than hedonism, lust, and consumerism) be represented in television, movies, and popular magazines. Yet there was a time when popular culture was Christian.

It was called the high Middle Ages, from roughly A.D. 1000 to 1500.

It wasn't heaven on earth, by any means. Protestants, for example, are troubled by many doctrines and practices of the medieval church. But it is instructive even for Protestants to look at the era, for it was the only era in history when Christianity held sway over all of society, managing to lodge itself in the king's palace and the peasant's hut, in the farmer's field and the merchant's shop—and in every nook and cranny of daily life.

In this issue, we look at the faith in the nooks and crannies of the medieval world, faith as it was lived out every day by everyday people. We examine the main devotional practices that energized Christians. We look at some individual portraits of "typical" medieval Christians. We glimpse into family life and knighthood, into heresy and cathedral building.

This is by no means a comprehensive look at everyday faith in the Middle Ages; we only dip into the immense and complex medieval world, and then only here and there. Our hope is simply this: to give you a feel for what it might have been like to live in the nooks and crannies of late-medieval Europe.

P.S. Beginning with the next issue, we'll feature letters to the editor. So let us know what you think—by "snail mail," e-mail, or fax! Send your letters to 465 Gundersen Drive, Carol Stream, IL, 60188, or by e-mail to [chedit@aol.com](mailto:chedit@aol.com), or by fax to 708-260-0114.

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## Religion With a Human Face

One woman's extraordinary faith reveals much about the ordinary faith of the Middle Ages.

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Margery Kempe was not a typical medieval lay person. Far from it: few lay people abandoned spouse, children, work, and ordinary life in search of religious perfection, as she did. People in her company often grew tired of her religious talk, vigorous weeping, and unusual religious practices, such as vegetarianism and wearing white garments. Her visions aroused suspicion that she was possessed or epileptic or a hypocrite or a heretic.

But Margery also had admirers, especially among the clergy, who defended her visions and tears as genuine gifts from God.

It's difficult to determine what exactly "everyday faith" was in the late Middle Ages. The vigorous and slack all practiced the same religion. Though there were doubters and dissidents, most men and women, masters and servants, kings and cloth merchants were generally moved by the same religious beliefs and rituals.

In spite of, and maybe because of, her extreme devotion, Margery reveals in sharp relief the everyday faith of the late Middle Ages.

## Unsatisfied Hunger

One central yearning had great force in later medieval life: an intense desire for religious experience.

In the 1200s, the church, more than ever before, began successfully reaching people through preaching, art and drama, books and pamphlets, and annual confession and Communion, among other things. In response, there was a widespread hunger for religious experience, a hunger, ironically, the church, which created it, could not satisfy. People found parish life humdrum and spiritually undemanding. In unprecedented numbers, devout lay people began seeking a more intense religious life while staying married and working in their secular vocations.

Margery Kempe was one of those people. She was born about 1373 in Norfolk (England), the daughter of a respected merchant and public official. She married merchant John Kempe, with whom she had fourteen children. She died sometime after 1433.

In her younger years, she was orthodox and respectful of the church—though she knew some clergy were spiritually lax and sometimes told them so. Still, she went frequently to her parish church, heard sermons, confessed often, weekly sought the Eucharist, fasted, wore a hair shirt for a time, said her rosary, and gave alms. But she sought something more.

In her twenties, Margery began having visions in which she talked on a friendly basis with Jesus, Mary, and some saints. In one vision, Jesus told her that her religious practices were good, but they were for "beginners," and that Margery should go deeper.

Thus began her remarkable religious quest. At about age 60, she dictated her memories to two scribes, who put together the first autobiography in English, the *Book of Margery Kempe*, from which we know her story.

## Discovering the Gospels

This passion for religious experience was shaped by a growing awareness of the four Gospels.

Between the 500s and 900s in western Europe, the Old Testament loomed large in religious consciousness. Perhaps the Germans and Celts identified with the Hebrews, who subdued rival nations and conquered the Promised Land. Early medieval clergy were inspired by Old Testament references to incense in worship, anointings with oil, tithing, and strict observance of the Sabbath.

These Christians read the New Testament filtered through their warlike cultures and Old Testament imagery. Jesus was more the stern judge to whom all would answer. The apocalyptic judgment in Matthew 25:31–46, with its grand vision of the end of time, with the separation of the just and unjust, held the early medieval imagination.

After the Viking invasions ended in the eleventh century, western Europe gradually became settled, urbanized, literate, populous, and prosperous. Under these conditions, Europe “discovered” the Gospels, which resulted in a deep religious change, comparable to the Reformers’ “discovery” of the apostle Paul in the 1500s.

A Gospel-based faith fostered an emotional spirituality that slowly flowed through society. The religious (monks and nuns), priests, and laity yearned to learn more about Jesus, his mother, and his apostles. The new spiritual yearning, coupled with wider literacy, encouraged the use of personal prayer books, like the lavish “books of hours” made for the rich, and the many plainer books for the less wealthy.

Since Latin was a barrier for most people, vernacular translations flourished—not only of the Gospels but also of the Psalms (which were believed to have been written about Christ), devotional tracts, and sermons of early church fathers.

Even the illiterate had means of learning more about biblical stories. Margery Kempe was illiterate—a surprising condition considering the comfortable surroundings of her youth. However, she gained religious knowledge from readers, confessors, and preachers. In her autobiography, she says (referring to herself in the third person) of one priest, “He read to her many a good book of high contemplation and other books, such as the Bible with doctors’ [theologians’] commentaries on it,” and she mentions specifically, *Revelations of Saint Bridget of Sweden*, *The Scale of Perfection* by Walter Hilton, and Bonaventure’s *Stimulus Amoris*.

Margery also learned the Bible in long conversations she had with confessors (spiritual directors) and clergy. On one occasion, Margery was chastising an archbishop about his swearing. She disliked swearing, especially oaths that referred to Jesus, for example, “By his wounds!” She told the archbishop, “You shall answer for them, unless you correct them or else put them out of your service.” Then she noted, “In a most meek and kindly way, he allowed her to say what was on her mind and gave her a handsome answer. ... And so their conversation continued until stars appeared in the sky.”

## Passion for Preaching

Margery’s main source of Gospel knowledge came from preaching. She loved sermons. In the late Middle Ages, with an increasing demand for more biblical knowledge came a surge of interest in preaching, especially preaching that spoke to people personally. There were few good preachers, and those who were good became celebrities.

Margery told of one renowned Franciscan friar: "On St. James's Day, the good friar preached in St. James's chapel yard in Lynn [her home town] ... where there were many people and a good audience, for he had a holy name and great favor amongst the people, in so much that, some men, if they knew that he would preach in the district, would go with him or else follow him from town to town, such great delight had they to hear him."

Margery was often deeply moved by preaching. Preachers generally tolerated her loud sobbing; they simply waited for her to quiet down and then went on.

On one occasion, though, her outbursts annoyed the Franciscan preacher, who barred her from his sermons. "She felt so much sorrow," she wrote of the occasion, "that she did not know what she could do, for she was excluded from the sermon, which was to her the highest comfort on earth when she could hear it, and equally ... the greatest pain on earth, when she could not hear it."

### **Embracing the Hard Sayings**

This Gospel-based faith disrupted centuries-old patterns of Christian behavior. Hearers of Gospel stories began to emphasize their literal details and meanings—and act accordingly.

Medieval theologians taught that Jesus' hard sayings were advice, "evangelical counsels," and not commands applicable to everyone. For centuries, only monks and nuns embraced Jesus' hard sayings by abandoning wealth, sex, family, vengeance, pride, ambition, and the like.

But as the Gospel revival spread through society, some lay people, including Margery Kempe, believed they too were called to observe the hard sayings as best they could. For example, at one point, Margery and her husband took vows of chastity. The church had no theological reasons to object to this yearning, but it had difficulty with some of the practical consequences—e.g., husbands' deserting wives and families to go on pilgrimages, wives' unilaterally taking vows of chastity.

This new emphasis sparked the creation of two orders. In the early 1200s, a radically new form of monastic life was created by Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) and Dominic of Calaruega (1170–1221), which shaped, and was shaped by, the new spiritual yearning. The friars, or "brothers," tried to imitate literally the life of Jesus and his apostles. They were deeply moved by Luke 9:3–6, the passage where Jesus sends out the Twelve to proclaim the kingdom of God, taking "nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic."

In literal imitation, the early friars, composed of both clergy and laity, wandered about in a poverty verging on destitution, dressed in coarse garments tied at the waist with a rope, preaching in town squares, fields, and churches. Even after the initial burst of enthusiasm, their preaching remained lively, emotional, and Gospel centered. The best preachers drew large crowds and stimulated explosive reactions of repentance and religious exaltation.

Unlike monks, who lived behind monastic walls, the friars worked in the world. Their energy and creativity were seemingly boundless. They taught at universities, and many become great theologians—to name three, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and William of Occam. They managed investment funds in Italy to provide poor girls with dowries so they could marry. They went as missionaries to Muslim countries and even to the Far East.

They were also popular confessors, sought out especially by growing numbers of devout women for the advice they could give. Margery Kempe found some of her best advisers and supporters from among the friars.

## **Good Friday and Christmas Meet**

This Gospel-centered faith highlighted two special days of the church year, days which focused on the human, forgiving Christ.

In early Christianity, the central religious festival was Easter, which celebrated the risen, glorious, triumphant Jesus, the conqueror of death. But Gospel-centered faith emphasized the suffering Christ of Good Friday. Devout people believed Jesus had endured this pain for them personally. The Gospel accounts of scourging with whips, crowning with thorns, carrying of the cross, the pounding of the nails, the hours of suffering, and the lonely death were represented in art, mulled over in prayer, and even imitated in life. Crucifixes became increasingly realistic, so much so that today many moderns find them grotesque. But to medieval Christians, they were inspirational.

At Leicester, Margery "came into a fine church where she beheld a crucifix, which was piteously portrayed and lamentable to behold, and through beholding of which, the passion of our Lord entered her mind, whereupon she began to melt and utterly dissolve with tears of pity and compassion. Then the fire of love kindled so quickly in her heart that she could not keep it secret for, whether she liked it or not, it caused her to break out in a loud voice and cry astonishingly, and weep and sob very terribly, so that many men and women wondered at her because of it."

When Margery was in Jerusalem, the Franciscan guides described how Christ had suffered in various places: "And this creature [as she referred to herself] wept and sobbed as plenteously as though she had seen our Lord with her bodily eyes suffering his passion at that time.... And when they came up on to the Mount of Calvary, she fell down because she could not stand or kneel, but writhed and wrestled with her body, spreading her arms out wide, and cried with a loud voice as though her heart would have burst apart, for in the city of her soul, she saw truly and freshly how our Lord was crucified."

The Gospel-centered faith also had a new appreciation for Christmas, with its emphasis on Christ's humanity and vulnerability. Francis of Assisi created what may have been the first Christmas creche in 1223 to make real Christ's humanity. People could see that Jesus had been like them, that he had been a real baby.

Likewise, Mary grew in prominence. A real baby needed a real mother, and the loving young mother and her beautiful baby were depicted countless times in all the visual arts.

Margery Kempe was also deeply moved by the birth story. She meditated on it so long and intensely that she imaginatively entered the biblical scenes. In one long vision, she was Mary's maid, caring for her and Jesus in the way a medieval servant girl might bring food, do chores, and change diapers.

## **Holy Travel**

Religious pilgrimages were astoundingly popular during this era. Many medieval Christians wanted to see with their own eyes the holy places and holy people that figured so prominently in their religion.

Margery Kempe was a tireless pilgrim. She began in a modest way by visiting with her husband local shrines in England. But in one astounding burst of energy, she deserted her family and visited Assisi, Rome, Jerusalem, and Compostela (in Spain) in a three-year period. She then went to shrines in Norway, Prussia, and Charlemagne's capital, Aachen.

There was a ritual for undertaking a pilgrimage. At the parish church and before relatives, friends, and neighbors, pilgrims were invested with a distinctive outfit consisting of a broad-brimmed hat, a sort of knapsack, and a walking staff. Pilgrims settled accounts and paid debts.

Before Margery set out on her epic pilgrimage, "She asked the parish priest of the town where she was living to say on her behalf from the pulpit that if there were any man or woman who claimed any debt against her husband or her, they should come and speak with her before she went, and she, with God's help, would settle up with each of them so that they would hold themselves content."

True pilgrims forgave enemies and asked pardon of those they had offended. Before Margery entered Jerusalem, she spoke to her fellow pilgrims, with whom she had lots of friction because of her annoying religious talk. "She said to them that she supposed they were annoyed with her, 'I pray you, sirs, be in charity with me, for I am in charity with you. And if any of you have in any way trespassed against me, God forgive you for it, as I do.'"

Most late-medieval adults probably went on pilgrimage, if only a day trip to a regional saint's shrine. But the geographic heart of the Christian story was Palestine. Between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, hundreds of thousands made the long, expensive, and dangerous pilgrimage to the Holy Land for the same reasons Margery Kempe did: she said she "had a desire to see those places where he [Jesus] was born, and where he suffered his passion and where he died, together with other holy places where he was during his life and after his resurrection."

## Supernatural Remains

Pilgrimage arose out of the intersection of two theological ideas: the need to do penance for sins and the cult of relics.

A pilgrimage was considered penitential, like fasting or alms giving, because it required a great sacrifice of time and money. It was also dangerous. Many pilgrims died of disease or shipwreck or at the hands of robbers; some were enslaved. But to the medieval pilgrim, the risks were worth the reward: forgiveness of sins and renewed faith.

Pilgrimage was rooted in the veneration of saints and their relics, or *relicta* ("things left behind"). Medieval Christians believed the barrier between this life and the next was porous: saints were not dead any more than Jesus was. Theologians taught that people could not only ask saints, God's friends, to intercede for them but could do so from any locale. But many medieval people believed that at the shrines, saints were present in a special way—Saint Peter at Rome, Saint James at Compostela, Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury, and so on.

The bodily remains of saints were taken from their graves in solemn ceremony and placed in receptacles called reliquaries, which were often magnificent works of art. Since the demand for saints' bodies outpaced the supply, the bodies were reverently dismembered, and the pieces received the same treatment as intact bodies. In addition, items associated with the saint—clothing, pieces of a cross or sword by which they were executed, and the like—were also revered.

Many medieval Christians found it deeply satisfying to go to the saint, kneel in his or her presence, touch his or her remains (if one was especially fortunate), and ask the saint to intercede with God. Pilgrims often expected miracles, especially healing from infirmities and disease, at these shrines. Margery believed that while she was at Jerusalem, she had received a special spiritual gift, which she described as a roar or a scream, which she could not control when religious emotion swept over her.

## Helping the Dead

Concern for the dead was another central feature of late medieval religion, and the doctrine of purgatory was very much alive. The official teaching was hazy at the edges, but the point was clear enough: some Christians who had died in God's grace were still burdened with unforgiven sins and unfulfilled penances.

They needed to be cleansed.

People in purgatory could no longer help themselves, and they might remain in the purging fire for decades, centuries, or unimaginably long periods. Medieval Christians had a strong sense of solidarity, and they believed they could help one another even across the grave. One person's prayers, alms, or good deeds could literally be donated to another person, including those in purgatory. Those concerned about dead parents, spouses, children, or others prayed for them, asking God to be merciful and to shorten their time of purgation.

Margery Kempe believed she was told by Jesus that she could assign her merit to other people. Once, when she was reluctant to leave the Holy land, she said Jesus spoke to her: " 'Daughter, as often as you say or think, ***Worshipped be all those holy places in Jerusalem that Christ suffered bitter pain and passion in***, you shall have the same pardon as if you were there with your bodily presence, both for yourself and for all those that you will give it to.' "

Margery believed she was chosen as a special intercessor for all in need, including those in purgatory. Sometimes, she said, she would continue "weeping for two hours and often longer without ceasing when in mind of our Lord's passion, sometimes for her own sin, sometimes for the sin of the people, sometimes for the souls in purgatory, sometimes for those that were in poverty or in any distress, for she wanted to comfort them all."

If saints were honored on All Saints' Day (November 1), Christians in purgatory were remembered on All Souls' Day, November 2. But many thought official prayer once a year was not enough. Medieval miracle stories help us understand this anxious concern for the dead. These stories often tell of people coming back from purgatory to visit their kin or friends, asking for their help or lamenting their failure to help.

The most powerful form of prayer was the Mass, and saying masses for the dead was a central feature of popular faith. In the thousands of wills that survive from this era, it is typical to find legacies for prayer and masses. People of middling wealth might arrange for a mass on the day of their death, for the thirty days thereafter, and on the first anniversary of their death. The rich created perpetual endowments, called chantries, in which a priest was to say Mass daily for them, their kinsfolk, and if they were generous, for all Christians in purgatory, until the end of time.

### **Lift High the Bread**

In the 1100s and 1200s, some heretical groups, called Cathars, or Albigensians, taught that all material things were essentially evil; they consequently attacked the belief that Jesus could really be present in the bread and wine of the sacrament. In reaction, the church reemphasized the goodness of material creation and defended the reality of Jesus' presence in the elements, especially through the doctrine of transubstantiation: while the bread and wine appeared unchanged to the senses, theologians taught, the priest's consecration had in fact made them Jesus' real body and real blood.

The belief in Jesus' real sacramental presence found strong resonance in people influenced by the Gospel-centered faith. At mass they could see with their own eyes the Creator and Savior of the universe and could, by partaking, be physically united with him.

The awesomeness of Jesus' physical presence discouraged casual reception of the Eucharistic bread (lay people didn't receive the cup). So partaking of the elements was rare for most lay people. The church demanded it at least once a year, during Easter, but only after confession, penance, sexual abstinence, and fasting had prepared the believer to receive worthily.

Most Christians were content each Sunday merely to observe the consecrated host—the Lord lifted up, as they believed. Some lay people, in fact, called out for the priest to raise the consecrated host so they could

see it, a practice eventually incorporated into the Mass. The metrical "Lay Folks' Mass Book" shows the importance of this practice.

***When the time is near of sacring [Communion]***

A little bell is wont to ring.  
Then shalt thou do reverence  
To Jesus Christ's own presence  
That may loose all baleful bands.  
Kneeling hold up both thy hands  
And so the Elevation thou behold,  
For this is he whom Judas sold,  
And then was scourged and killed on rood [cross],  
And there for mankind shed his blood,  
And died and rose and went to heaven,  
And yet he'll come with justice even  
To every man for what he's done:  
That same is he you look upon.

—*Lay Folks' Mass Book, 1357*

Margery Kempe received permission from the archbishop of Canterbury to receive the Eucharist every Sunday, an unusual practice for a lay person and one for which she was criticized.

Nonetheless some people found it difficult to believe that what looked and tasted like ordinary food was really the body of Christ. Again, eucharistic miracle stories that flourished in the 1200s tell us much about the age: In one a priest tortured by doubts sees the host bleed when he breaks it. In another, when a priest raises the host above his head, a doubting lay person sees an infant in the priest's hands.

To refute heretics and console doubters, the church sanctioned the festival of Corpus Christi ("the body of Christ"). It was celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, usually in good spring weather. It began in church with a formal religious ceremony, including a special mass (whose words and hymns may have been composed by Thomas Aquinas). The festival then moved into the streets. A procession of clergy, town officials, members of guilds and confraternities (lay religious societies), and others followed the consecrated host, which was displayed in a magnificent vessel. The streets were lined with people, who decorated their houses with tapestries, flowers, branches, and other adornments. Believers knelt as the host, to them the body of the Lord of the universe, passed.

In some places, the festival included public plays—the Corpus Christi plays—so that all could see enacted on wagons the Christian account of salvation from Creation to the Last Judgment.

These are most of the main characteristics of late-medieval Catholicism; an intense interest in good works and devotion to Mary were two other features. But medieval Christianity is too complex, with layers of practice and belief inherited from many centuries, to summarize briefly.

This great "age of faith," as it's been called, had its share of skeptics and critics. Some believers relied too much on superstition, and most of the devout did not take their faith as far as did Margery Kempe. Still, the central threads of late-medieval Catholicism are revealed in her life: it was a faith ignited by a rediscovery of the Gospels; an identification with Jesus, Mary, the apostles, and saints; and especially a desire to see, touch, and emotionally experience the truths of the Christian faith.

## Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: A Gallery of Unexpected Companions

Four Pilgrims in *Canterbury Tales* show the startling mix of medieval faith.

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It's easy to revile or romanticize the medieval church as a monolith of religious attitudes. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, however, opens a view to the 1300s of extraordinary richness and color.

The son of a wealthy vintner, Chaucer (1343–1400) lived most of his life at court, serving as a soldier, judge, member of parliament, and ambassador. Chaucer also composed poems and courtly romances, and in later years, his earthy, realistic *Canterbury Tales*.

The *Tales* introduce us to roughly two dozen pilgrims making their way to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury. To amuse themselves, they engage in a storytelling contest.

Chaucer portrays his pilgrims with a vividness and detail unmatched by any British writer before him (or any but Shakespeare and Dickens since), and religious themes color almost every page. Though a work of fiction, *Canterbury Tales* has helped historians peek into late-1300s English life. Here are sketches of four of Chaucer's revealing characters.

### The Wife of Bath *Genial rebel*

Flamboyantly dressed, with a hat "broad as a shield," the sunny, talkative Wife of Bath gallops through the *Tales* as one of literature's most endearing religious rebels.

The Wife, Alisoun, was married first at age 12—and then four more times after that. She has outlived all five, speaks of them with rough affection, and waits to "welcome the sixth, whenever he appears." In the meantime, the Wife carries on a vigorous crusade against the church's attitudes toward marriage, sexuality, and women.

Having been criticized for her multiple marriages, Alisoun defends her right to marry as long as she can continue to outlive her husbands. Where does the Bible say we can marry only once? Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob were holy men, and none of them stopped at one wife. God himself tells us "to wax and multiply" (she adds, "That gentle text can I well understand").

She is far from persuaded by the church's ideal of virginity. Where, she asks, did God ever command that? How could he command virginity without condemning marriage? She knows Saint Paul counseled virginity, "but counseling is no commandment." And, in a curiously unanswerable argument, she asks,

And certainly if seed were never sown,  
How ever could virginity be grown?

In other words, if everyone stays a virgin, we'll eventually run out of them! Virginity, in any case, is a counsel for those who would live perfectly. "And by your leave," she demurs, "that am not I."

The climax of Alisoun's life comes in a brawl she has with her fifth and favorite husband, Jankyn, over his women-slandering tracts. These tracts, published by the church, collected horrible stories about women in an attempt to persuade young men to eschew marriage for the celibate priesthood. Jankyn, for his amusement, insisted on reading such tracts aloud to his wife. One evening, sick and tired of hearing it, Alisoun tears some pages from the book and punches Jankyn into the fireplace.

Jankyn in turn knocks Alisoun out and then feels so contrite he burns his book and offers up to her all "the mastery, the sovereignty" in their marriage. "After that day," Alisoun concludes, "we never had debate."

The authority of the church and the structure of the family are perhaps not such new issues, after all.

### **The Prioress** ***Sentimental savage***

She looks every inch the heroine of medieval romance—her nose graceful, her eyes "gray as glass," her mouth small, soft and red, her forehead fair and broad. As was expected of the nobility, she speaks excellent French—but, Chaucer slyly notes, only as it was taught in England, since the "French of Paris was to her unknown." This is Chaucer's Prioress, who clearly missed her calling as a medieval lady.

A prioress headed a women's monastery and was presumably concerned first with religious matters. But in the Middle Ages, as perhaps in all ages, priests, monks, and nuns were sometimes interested more in this world than the next.

The Prioress, Chaucer notes, "took pains to imitate the behavior of the court and to be dignified of manner." Raised in a noble family, Madame Eglentyne has learned impeccable table manners. She never spills a drop or a morsel. She reaches politely for the meat. She wipes her lips so clean that "in her cup there was not a farthing seen of grease, after she had drunk her draft."

Sentimental to a degree, she weeps over a mouse caught in a trap and weeps again if someone takes a stick to her dogs. And the golden ornament on her rosary reads, AMOR VINCIT OMNIA ("Love Conquers All").

The Prioress's story reveals more sinister contradictions than these, however. Eglentyne begins her tale with a beautiful and moving invocation to the Madonna, the climax of which runs,

#### ***O mother-maid, maid-mother, chaste and free!***

O bush unburnt, burning in Moses' sight,  
Thou that didst ravish down from deity  
Upon thy humbleness the Spirit's flight  
That lit upon thy heart, and in whose might  
The Word took flesh, help me to tell my story  
In reverence of thee and of thy glory!

Her story, however, turns out to be deeply unsettling: A young Christian boy is murdered in the Jewish quarter of an Asian city. By a miracle of the Virgin Mary, the crime comes to light. The Christians promptly hang and disembowel the Jews, and the boy's spirit floats off to join other young martyrs hymning the Lamb.

Chaucer described Madame Eglentyne as "coy and simple," but her tale reflects a casual, almost off-hand savagery in medieval Christendom's attitude toward Jews that would produce monstrous results for centuries to come. And this from a lady who weeps over wounded mice.

## **The Parson** ***Puritan ahead of his time***

On Chaucer's gallery of rogue clerics—his worldly Monk, lecherous Friar, bribe-extorting Summoner, huckster Pardoner, and vain Prioress—four deadly sins and one venial spring vigorously to life, and all take holy orders! Quietly setting these frauds in the worst possible light, meanwhile, is Chaucer's model priest.

A "poor parson of a town," he was "rich ... of holy thought and work." Unlike church careerists, the Parson never "left his sheep encumbered in the mire to run to London" after advancement but "dwelt at home and kept well his fold."

Against a background of shameless hypocrisy, the Parson lives resolutely according to his beliefs. He feels it his sacred duty to set the best possible example for his parishioners: "For if gold rust, what should iron do?" He helps his poorest parishioners out of church funds and his own resources. In times of sickness or misfortune, he braves rain and thunder to visit the most distant of his flock, "upon his feet, and in his hand a staff"—the very image of his Master.

Gentle to sinners, never arrogant or haughty, he nonetheless sharply rebukes the obstinate, "whether of high or low estate."

When asked to tell a story, the Parson refuses. Why, he asks, should he sew chaff when he can sew wheat? If they wish, however, he will "show them the way of that glorious, perfect pilgrimage to the celestial Jerusalem."

The Parson's tale is a traditional Catholic treatise on examining one's conscience before confession. Written in plain prose, an elaborate structure, and a blizzard of biblical quotations, the treatise analyzes the Seven Deadly Sins, defining each and giving counsel how to fight them.

As we read on, both the treatise and the Parson begin to seem oddly familiar, and we gradually find ourselves not in the 1300s but the 1600s, where the Parson's spiritual heirs, the Puritans, have turned England on its head, and some of them have even sailed across the ocean to a continent the saintly Parson could never have imagined was there.

## **The Pardoner** ***Indulgence hawker***

Long, yellow hair falls on his shoulders as he rides bareheaded in "the latest style." He has a voice high as a goat's, eyes bulging as a hare's, and a face that never grows a beard. As he rides along, he sings loud and merrily, "Come hither, love, to me!"

On his saddle, this grotesque figure carries a leather pouch "brimful of pardon, come all hot from Rome." For this is the Pardoner, the hawker of indulgences, and the vehicle of Chaucer's most violent attack on the corruptions of the medieval church.

The Pardoner seems hell-bent to scam every Christian in England. In his pack he carries a pillowcase, which he says is Mary's veil. A shred of cloth is part of the very sail Saint Peter used before Jesus called him. With these and other "relics," he boasts that, once he finds a little country town, he can make more money in a day than the local parson will in two months.

Furthermore, he loves explaining how he does it. First, he tells his listeners he is from Rome and shows them papal bulls certifying his indulgences. Then he displays other warrants signed by the bishop:

That none may be so bold, no priest nor clerk,  
To interfere with Jesus' holy work.

Then he hauls out his relics, especially a sheep's bone that "was that of a holy Jew." Dip the bone in a well, wash the tongue of your cattle with water from the well, and it miraculously cures all worm infestations and snake bites. Even more remarkably, the bone cures jealousy: Boil it in your husband's soup, he tells the ladies, and he'll trust you ever after,

Although he knows that, for a certainty,  
You've bedded down a priest, or two, or three.

There will always be some skeptics, of course, but the Pardoner knows how to deal with them. He proclaims up front that some people's sins are so heinous,

Such folk shall lack the power and the grace  
To offer to my relics in this place.

Who would have the courage to defy an accusation like that?

Finally, the Pardoner launches into his sermon. His constant theme: The love of money is the root of evil!

Of avarice and of such cursedness  
Is all my preaching, for it makes them free  
To give of all they have—namely, to me.

The Pardoner and his ilk will, alas, have another century to ply their trade before Martin Luther attacks the corruptions Chaucer so brilliantly depicted.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## An Inkeeper's Faith

Christianity in one Spanish village—a historical re-creation.

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In a blustery May night in the early thirteenth century, an old priest registered as a guest at Juan de la Cruz's inn in Castile. Juan wasn't surprised at the priest's age—a large number of pilgrims who came through Silos were elderly. But he was surprised with this priest's curiosity.

The priest, Pierre, had traveled enough to know that different areas of Christendom had different customs, and he always inquired about such wherever he went. Pierre had heard that, because of centuries of Moorish occupation, the Spains (Spain was not yet spoken of in the singular) had many eccentric religious practices.

### Holy Village

The year was 1225 (though Juan did not know this; *anno Domini* was a system of dating unknown to him). Juan was the third in his family to run the inn at Santo Domingo de Silos. Juan's ancestors had worked as day-laborers in the monks' fields and as "carters," transporting agricultural products, mostly wine, to Silos and elsewhere. Over time the village became economically diverse and independent.

Although on Sundays many villagers attended the monastic church, two other village parishes had been established, one with a secular priest (a priest under obedience to a bishop), and one with a priest from the monastery. Though the order, the Cistercians, had originally forbidden its monks to serve as parish priests—to keep themselves from the world—over time some monks had softened their views.

Though not on the direct pilgrimage route to the popular Santiago de Compostela, Santo Domingo was still a favorite detour for pilgrims. The saint after whom Santo Domingo de Silos, monastery and village, was named was widely known in Castile—Silos had been destroyed in the war against the Moors and had been rebuilt by a holy monk named Domingo. Traffic had grown sufficiently to encourage Juan's grandfather to build a modest inn. So every year, especially from April through October, the pilgrims brought their offerings and spent their money for food and shelter.

### Spotty Knowledge

Juan, like most of his friends, did not know how to read or write (though he had developed a rough-and-ready system of bookkeeping for his inn). Juan's priest, more than many priests, valued letters and had made a standing offer to village boys to teach them how to read and write Latin. Juan's parents had not seen the point of this, so they had not sent him to the priest's makeshift schoolroom.

Juan's religious education was therefore spotty. It was for laymen like him that many priests wrote popular biographies of local saints. They wrote in the common tongue, that is, a form of street-Latin-become-Spanish, to tell saints' lives, stories of the miraculous, and to praise Our Lady in her joys and sorrows.

Villagers told or summarized such stories to each other, some of which were put in verse form. Often the writing was a churchly version of the popular love songs of the wandering minstrels. The writers hoped

that what of the faith a person like Juan did not pick up in church, he would learn on the street from these ballads.

Juan picked up much of his Christian education in the village's rhythms, from the ringing of the bells calling people to worship, to the celebration of the feasts of the church year. On the many annual feast days, statues of Christ or Mary were carried in procession through the village, stopping in each neighborhood. Hymns were sung, prayers prayed, and Juan with the others dropped to his knees in the open street.

In the evenings of feast days, singing and dancing mixed sacred and secular themes in a way that was hard to separate.

From time to time, Juan also heard sermons by wandering preachers, like the Dominican who had preached the past summer in the little square in front of Juan's inn. Juan had never seen a Dominican before. The order of friars had just recently been founded by a Spaniard, and officially sanctioned only for ten years. Juan couldn't remember much of the sermon, except some warnings about the need to abstain from sex during penitential periods and before taking Communion.

### **Strange Customs**

"How did you get married?" was one question the wandering priest asked Juan.

"I was married 'at the church door.'" Pierre had heard this expression all over Europe. It meant that either vows had been exchanged in the presence of a priest, or that the union had been solemnized by prayers at the church door.

"Do you hear that Rome now insists that all Christians marry in church or at the church door," said Pierre, "at least in the presence of a priest."

Juan was taken aback. At his wife's urging, he had had a priest solemnize their vows. But many married people in Silos had never done so. This was going to be a piece of news!

Pierre tried to ask about the liturgy Juan's parish priest used. Spain's liturgy was rumored to be especially eccentric. The old Spanish rite, which had been used under Muslim rule, was supposed to have been replaced with the Roman rite, and Pierre suspected that this had not been done in Silos. Juan didn't seem to understand what Pierre was talking about.

Juan admitted, "I must confess that on Sundays, I am often too busy to go to Mass. I often stay with those in my inn wishing a drink."

"What do you do if you sin?" Pierre continued. "You know Rome now requires everyone to confess and take Communion once a year."

Juan had heard the rumor, and he nodded his head. "It's been many years since I've confessed to a priest. When I have something to confess, I either go to one of the monks or to my priest and kneel before him while he sits and listens. It's funny; he speaks to me in Castilian, but he prays in Latin."

Pierre then asked, "Are you involved in any parish activities, besides the Mass?"

"Well, we have a fraternity, an association of all the tradesmen in town. We meet in the church yard when the weather allows it, and we pledge to take care of the widows of the fraternity members. We also donate food for the poor."

From the monastery, Juan suddenly heard the bells announcing vespers. Like many villagers, every noon and evening, he prayed short prayers the priest had taught him. Juan thought he could suitably impress his pious visitor by concluding the evening with one of them. So he bowed and began, "Hail, Mary, full of grace...."

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## Parenting With Mother Church

In the medieval world, what you taught your children was not just your business.

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As opposed to our own era, in the Middle Ages, religious nurture was a public concern. Many felt orthodox Christianity was properly learned and celebrated in the parish church, in full view of one's neighbors—not in the privacy of one's home. A faith nurtured solely in the home could produce heresy, for the home was shielded from the eyes of the church.

Therefore much of Christian nurture involved participation in public ceremonies. Still, the family had a role to play, and the church tried, with mixed success, to guide parents as they nurtured their children in the faith.

### In the Beginning

Starting at birth, parents and church worked together to protect children's souls. Parents had their child baptized in the church to wash away original sin.

Many babies died at birth, so the church allowed anyone to perform this sacrament, even the midwife. One manual for parish priests tells them to instruct midwives to have clean water ready should they have to baptize a dying infant: "And though the child but half be born, Head and neck and no more, Bid her hesitate no longer To christen it and cast on water."

Normally, the father and godparents brought the child to the parish church for baptism. Outside the church, the priest blessed the child and put salt in its mouth to symbolize wisdom and to exorcise demons. The party moved inside where the child was immersed in water and anointed with oil, with the godparents making a profession of faith for the child. Afterward, the baptismal party returned home to celebrate the event.

The godparents usually named the child after themselves or a saint, whom they hoped would watch over the new Christian throughout his or her life.

Mothers generally did not attend the baptism; custom advised she wait six weeks before entering a holy place, at which point she might take part in a ceremony of thanksgiving and purification called "churching."

### Teaching Tactics

The parents and parish priest together also saw to children's Christian education. The church taught through sermons, plays, and art work at the local church.

Parents, for their part, were expected to teach their children the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria, the Nicene Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Seven Deadly Sins. The church wanted godparents and grandparents to aid in this process, but the relationship between godparents and godchild was often not especially close. Sometimes parents and godparents

were not well-versed in the faith, so the priest would try to help as time and resources (e.g., a parish school) would allow.

It was primarily the mother's duty to inculcate piety. Christine de Pisan, the 1300s French writer, in *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, wrote, "The wise lady who loves her children ... will ensure that they will learn first of all to serve God and to read and write, and that the teacher will be careful to make them learn their prayers well." Some wealthy mothers commissioned prayer books or psalm books for their children to have.

Wealthy parents could afford tutors, books, and the time to oversee their children's education. But lower-class children might be sent to a parish school—if one was available. Classroom education was rare, confined largely to the cities and open mostly to boys. At school, children learned not only how to read and write but also the rudiments of the faith—and to respect the saints and obey God and their elders.

Items in the home were also teaching aids. At the front door, there might be a holy-water strop so those entering could dip their fingers in it and cross themselves. Nobles often had private chapels in their homes or castles for daily services. In the middle-class homes of Florence, families decorated altars with images of the saints and of the infant Jesus.

Giovanni Dominici, a 1400s Dominican writer, advised mothers to incline their sons toward a religious life by having them mimic the priest's behavior: "Sometimes they may be occupied in making garlands of flowers and greens with which to crown Jesus or to decorate the picture of the Blessed Virgin; they may light and extinguish little candles."

The liturgical calendar was another means of Christian nurture. For example, Christians fasted during Lent and on Fridays in commemoration of Jesus' temptation and crucifixion.

Confirmation, the rite by which children confirm the vows made for them at baptism, was rarely performed in the Middle Ages. A bishop had to perform confirmation, and many Christians, especially those in remote communities, went a lifetime without seeing their bishop.

### Families of Their Own

Medieval marriage was not about romantic love but family lineage, and it was the parents' responsibility to arrange for a good marriage for their children. Marriage involved the transfer of property, and among nobles, the creation of political alliances. The negotiations could take years to settle. Sometimes, in spite of parents' best wishes, children refused to abide by the parents' decisions.

The church, for its part, tried to assure that marriages were legitimate: the partners consented to the marriage, they were not related to each other, and neither was involved in a previous secret marriage. According to canon law, though, it was not a priest or witnesses who made marriage legitimate but the private agreement of a man and a woman. This made clandestine marriages a danger.

Parents feared that fortune hunters would lure young women (especially wealthy ones) into secret marriages, and court records show that such marriages were common. Four-fifths of all the marriage cases in fourteenth-century Ely, an English diocese, dealt with this issue—usually the woman claiming a marriage had taken place while the man denied it.

The church tried to prevent this by having the marriage publicly announced at a parish

service one month in advance. The church was also concerned that both partners remain faithful to one another, so divorce was generally not allowed.

Some parents, as perhaps their last act of Christian nurture, gave an image of Jesus to their betrothed daughter. While on pilgrimage in Italy, Margery Kempe, the fourteenth-century English mystic, reported how some women used them: "The woman who had the image [of the infant Jesus] in the chest, when they came into fine cities, took the image out of her chest and set it in the laps of respectable wives. And they would dress it up in shirts and kiss it as though it had been God himself."

For all this effort, there were still gaps in the system, and medieval religious reformers regularly denounced people's superstition and ignorance of doctrine. Still, between family and church, most children became good public Christians, who, in turn, began raising their own families in the same traditions.

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## Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: Christian History Timeline

### CHURCH & STATE

**1000**

**1000** Society composed of three orders: those who pray, those who fight, those who work

**1073–1085** Pope Gregory VII presses to end simony (sale of church offices), enforce clerical celibacy, and establish papal supremacy

**1095** Pope Urban II calls for a crusade to aid Eastern Christians threatened by Muslims

**1100**

c. **1150** Universities of Paris and Bologna founded; they take the lead in scholastic theology and canon law

**1198–1216** Innocent III, greatest lawyer pope, raises papacy's power to its height

**1200**

**1215** Fourth Lateran Council declares transubstantiation, obliges Christians to confess sins and receive Communion once a year, and proclaims a crusade against heretical Cathars

**1294** In reaction to church legalism and bureaucracy, pious hermit Peter Morone is elected pope (Celestine V); after five disastrous months, he resigns

**1300**

**1300** Pope Boniface VIII proclaims first jubilee year; offers plenary indulgence to pilgrims who come to Rome; thousands come

**1305–1377** The "Babylonian Captivity"—the pope resides at Avignon, France

**1377** Pope returns to Rome; the next year Great Papal Schism opens—Christendom divided between two (and after 1409, three) rival popes

**1400**

**1414–1418** The Council of Constance restores church unity; burns Jan Hus for heresy.

### EVERYDAY FAITH

**1000**

c. **1000** Christian laity seek a more active religious role

c. **1050** Growing popularity of pilgrimages to Rome, Santiago de Compostela (in Spain), and the Holy Land

**1096** Peter the Hermit leads the "People's Crusade" to disaster

**1100**

**Mid–1100s** Cathar and Waldensian movements spread  
Bernard of Clairvaux inspires reform in the Cistercian order

**1200**

c. **1200** The doctrine of purgatory takes shape

**Early 1200s** Francis of Assisi and Dominic of Calaruega found religious orders dedicated to apostolic poverty and preaching  
Growing devotion to Communion leads to creation of Feast of Corpus Christi

**Mid–1200s** Flagellant processions spread and inspire lay religious societies (confraternities)

**Late 1200s** Thousands of masses endowed for the dead in purgatory

**1300**

**1347–1350** Black Death kills one-third of Europe, sparking flagellant processions and attacks on Jews

**Late 1300s** The Lollard movement, inspired by John Wycliffe, spreads  
Female visionaries flourish: Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden, and Julian of Norwich

**1400**

**Early 1400s** Reform movements sweep through religious orders

## **ART & LITERATURE**

**1000**

**1098** Anselm writes *Why Did God Become Man?*

**1100**

c. **1100** Romanesque art represents Christ in majesty and the Virgin enthroned

**1121** Abelard publishes *Yes and No*

**1141** Hildegard of Bingen first writes of her visions

**Late 1100s** Gothic architecture celebrates God's glory in soaring vaults and stained glass

**1200**

**1260** Chartres Cathedral finished

**1273** Thomas Aquinas leaves *Summa Theologica* unfinished

**Late 1200s** Artists depict Jesus as one who suffers

**1300**

**1305** Dante begins *Divine Comedy*

**1386** Chaucer begins *Canterbury Tales*

**1400**

**1418** First appearance of Thomas Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*

**1455** First printed Bible by Gutenberg

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Scripture-Drenched Life

Medieval monasteries were Bible schools extraordinaire.

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Medieval society so valued constant prayer that many people made substantial donations to monasteries so that monks and nuns, largely freed from manual labor, could become "professional" pray-ers on behalf of the rest of society. In fact, many monks and nuns, in obedience to Paul's command to "pray without ceasing," lived an institutional life of prayer, praying day and night.

If the chief monastic activity was prayer, what would be better suited than the Jewish-Christian prayer book, the Psalms? Most Benedictine monks and nuns chanted all 150 psalms once a week in a cycle of seven daily "hours." Thus the first thing required of new monks or nuns was learning to read, if they did not already know how to. Second, they had to memorize the Psalms, which might take anywhere from six months to two years. The *Rule of the Master*, a forerunner of Benedict's *Rule*, says that monks traveling on monastery business should take with them wax tablets covered with Psalms to memorize.

### Bible Immersion

The Scripture-saturated life of a medieval monk is evident in the spiritual writings monks and nuns left behind. The works of Gregory the Great, Julian of Norwich, and Bernard of Clairvaux, to name three, are at many places nothing but a web of Scripture quotations and allusions.

For example, the following passage from Bernard's *On Loving God*, which is typical, contains at least 12 biblical quotations or allusions:

"The faithful ... know how totally they need Jesus and him crucified [1 Cor. 2:2]. While they admire and embrace in him the charity that surpasses all knowledge [Eph. 3:19], they are ashamed at failing to give what little they have in return for so great a love and honor. Easily they love more who realize they are loved more: 'He loves less to whom less is given' [Luke 7:43, 47; cf. 12:48]. Indeed, the Jew and pagan are not spurred on by such a wound of love as the church experiences, who says, 'I am wounded by love' [Song of Sol. 2:5, Old Latin version, cf. 4:9], and again, 'Cushion me about with flowers, pile up apples around me, for I languish with love' " [Song of Sol. 2:5, Vulgate].

"The church sees King Solomon with the diadem his mother had placed on his head [Song of Sol. 3:11, cf. 1 Kings 1]. She sees the Father's only Son carrying his cross [John 19:17, 25], the Lord of majesty [1 Cor. 2:8, Old Latin version], slapped and covered with spittle; she sees the Author of life and glory [Acts 3:15] pierced by nails, wounded by a lance [John 19:34, 25], saturated with abuse [Lam. 3:30], and finally laying down his precious life for his friends [Jer. 12:7, John 15:13]."

Not every medieval monk or nun was so immersed in Scripture, and there were periods when the Bible was neglected, but many monks and nuns were so steeped in the Bible, they could hardly express themselves without quoting it.

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## The Word Made Visible

Christians in the Middle Ages may have been largely illiterate, but they were not ignorant of the Bible.

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Many Christians think of the Middle Ages as the "dark ages," when learning came to a halt and the truths of Scripture were largely lost to the common man and woman. This picture, however, doesn't take in the medieval church's great intellectual activity and artistic creativity.

And despite widespread illiteracy, the Bible played an important role in the faith of the ordinary believer. It wasn't the *printed* word that imparted the key events and teachings of Scripture, but the *visual* word: mosaics, paintings, book illuminations, dramas, stained glass, and sculptures.

### Illuminated Manuscripts

For those who could read, Bible manuscripts were available in Latin, some containing beautiful "illuminations" or illustrations of Bible stories and characters. Earlier manuscripts were the work of monks, but urban workshops of illustrators developed later when wealthier individuals began to demand their own copies of Bibles and other religious works.

Some of the most well-known examples come from the eighth-century *Book of Kells* (probably from the island of Iona), which has illustrations of biblical stories as well as portraits of the four evangelists. *The Paris Psalter* (Psalms book) of the tenth century includes an illustration of David's repentance.

In the English Winchester Bible (1150–80), Saul's death in battle is illustrated inside the large capital F, which begins the book of 2 Samuel. In the late Middle Ages, large Bibles and psalters were produced, filled with illustrations of characters and events.

### Drama

One popular means of showing Bible stories was through drama. Three types were performed.

**Mystery plays** began as mini-plays that presented biblical topics during Easter. The Creed play, for instance, was divided into twelve pageants, each of which dramatized a phrase from the Nicene Creed; the phrase about forgiveness of sins, for example, was illustrated by the story of the woman taken in adultery.

As these mini-plays became longer and began using local languages (rather than Latin), they were moved to the church steps and yard. Eventually they were performed by theater guilds, lay brotherhoods, and even entire towns.

Subjects were drawn from the Old and New Testaments: the Creation, Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel, and the last judgment. In England, one well-known play was Noyes Fludde (Noah's Flood). Most mystery plays, however, were grouped around Christ's life and passion, his resurrection, and his ascension.

Usually these plays kept closely to the biblical narratives, but they sometimes elaborated on scenes such as Balaam and his donkey or the visit of the shepherds to the child Jesus. Some plays were organized into

cycles requiring 25 to 50 productions. In France a single play, *The Acts of the Apostles*, included 494 speaking parts and 61,908 lines of rhymed verse. It took 40 days to perform.

**Morality plays** were allegories: the characters represented vices, such as greed or gluttony, or virtues, such as truth or temperance. In York, England, the Pater Noster ("Our Father") play was designed to set forth "the goodness of the Lord's Prayer," linking the petitions of the Lord's Prayer to the seven virtues and the seven deadly sins. The petition, "Give us this day our daily bread," for example, might have a play illustrating the dangers of sloth, with the point that we shouldn't take for granted the Lord's provision.

**Miracle plays** depicted the lives of saints, some of which were biblical subjects such as Mary Magdalene or the conversion of Paul.

The medieval play could be elaborate. In France and Italy, a drama might take place in the town square on a stage 100 feet wide or in an old Roman theater. Paradise was represented above the stage and hell beneath it, with earthly scenes on the stage itself. In England, these plays were usually performed on wagons by traveling companies. The stage sets used trap doors and other mechanical devices to produce special effects such as flying angels, fire-breathing monsters, floods of water, and realistic-looking crucifixions.

Eventually, irrelevant, humorous, or satirical elements were introduced into the story line, so that by the end of the Middle Ages, the church no longer supported this art form. By the time of the Reformation, drama had become completely secular.

## **Stained Glass**

American visitors to western Europe are thrilled by tours of the great cathedrals erected in the later Middle Ages. Most of them are in the Gothic architectural style, characterized by emphasis on vertical lines and pointed archways.

The "flying buttress," an external stone support, made it possible to build walls of great height with less massive masonry than the older Romanesque architecture. Consequently, there was more space for windows, and slowly, the art of stained glass became an important way to represent biblical scenes and teachings.

The famous Cathedral of Chartres, near Paris, was begun in 1145 as the result of a revival that swept through Normandy. Its windows, remarkable for their rich blue and red colors, depict the infancy of Jesus, his life, and his crucifixion. They testify to the deep devotion people had to the person of Jesus Christ.

A window in the Cathedral of Canterbury, England, created in the thirteenth century, shows Lot and his daughters being led to safety while his wife looks back upon the destruction of Sodom; another depicts Moses striking the rock, which pours forth water.

## **Ivory, Metal, and Cloth**

Carving in wood or ivory was another medium used by medieval artists. An ivory book cover for a Psalter of Queen Melisende of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem (from the 1100s) depicts acts of charity in obedience to Jesus' words, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40).

Metalwork was another medium used. From Cyprus come two plates in raised silver showing scenes from the life of David; it is the work of Byzantine craftsmen from around 600. The bronze doors of the Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily, installed in 1186, have panels showing biblical episodes such as Abraham's sacrifice,

the murder of Abel, and Noah's ark.

An example of textile work comes from Angers, France: a set of seven tapestries representing scenes from the Book of Revelation, including the harlot Babylon, a woman riding on a seven-headed beast. These tapestries were made by master weaver Nicolas Bataille in the late 1200s.

## **Sculpture**

During the Middle Ages, sculptors preferred bas-relief (versus free-standing statues), in which panels of scenes were carved in stone. Sculpture decorates the tympanum, or semicircular panel, over the main doorways of many Gothic cathedrals, and biblical characters such as kings or prophets often appear on either side of the doors. As they entered the house of worship, people were reminded of scriptural passages.

The judgment of Christ was a favorite theme for the central doorway, and the doorway of Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris (from the 1200s) is a well-known example. Other biblical themes used over doorways include the mission of the twelve apostles as well as Christ with the symbolic beasts of the four evangelists.

At Chartres, the central doorway is flanked by large, column-like figures of Melchizedek offering bread and wine, Abraham with Isaac, Moses with his tablets, Samuel sacrificing a lamb, and David the ancestor of Christ.

Many medieval cathedrals and churches have friezes (a horizontal band) representing biblical events. At Notre Dame in Paris, the reliefs by Jean Ravy, executed in 1300–1350, form a frieze in the choir area. One side shows scenes from the life of Christ, the other, appearances of the risen Christ. The dramatic scene of Christ being led to crucifixion, from the Burgos Cathedral, Spain, is another example.

## **Mosaic**

Mosaic is the art of creating pictures by embedding small tiles of colored glass or stone in plaster. Important in the ancient world, mosaic reached its peak of development in Christian art and architecture of the Byzantine era, the early Middle Ages. It was used especially in the eastern Mediterranean, in that branch of the church now known as Eastern Orthodoxy.

Byzantine art tended to make physical form seem less material, and in these mosaics the beautifully robed figures of biblical characters or saints often seem to hover before a golden background.

The richest surviving early Byzantine mosaics are found in the church buildings of Ravenna, Italy, and date from the fifth and sixth centuries. A mosaic in the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo depicts Christ in judgment, separating the sheep from the goats; others illustrate the visit of the Magi and Jesus' Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican.

The rulers of Sicily in the 1100s and 1200s employed Byzantine artists to decorate their churches. The walls of the Monreale Cathedral are covered with excellent examples of Byzantine mosaic, including a majestic version of Christ Pantocrator ("ruler of all") in the dome over the main altar. Other mosaics of the era show Jesus healing the lame and blind, raising the daughter of Jairus, and multiplying the loaves and fish.

Many of the mosaics in Constantinople, the center of Byzantine civilization, were destroyed in the controversy over icons in the eighth and ninth centuries. The iconoclasts, "image-breakers," believed that veneration of icons of Christ or the saints was idolatry.

Eventually the Orthodox Church approved the use of icons, doing so on the basis of the Incarnation—since God became human in Jesus Christ, he assumed all human characteristics, including visibility. The icon, it is argued, partook of the spiritual essence of the figure it represented and thus served as a point of contact between the human and the divine.

Other early Byzantine mosaics were lost when Crusaders from western Europe raided Constantinople, and others still were plastered over when Muslim Turks captured the city in 1453.

The impressive Hagia Sophia, or Holy Wisdom church, in Istanbul (the modern name for Constantinople), was converted into a mosque by the Turks. But in 1933, American experts restored some of its Christian mosaics after it became a museum. In a scene probably executed in the 1200s, the skill of the Byzantine artists is displayed in one larger-than-life figure of Christ flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist.

## **Fresco and Painting**

Artistic standards changed over the centuries, and mosaic did not suit the new tastes, which wanted to see more spatial depth. Thus frescoes (painting on wet plaster) became more popular, partly because they were less expensive to produce.

Frescoes from the Middle Ages portray a variety of biblical scenes. The church of Santa Maria Antigua, Rome, contains an eighth-century painting of the crucifixion, and the holy family's flight into Egypt is the subject of a fresco in the church of Santa Maria Foris Portas, Castelseprio, Italy.

The earlier fresco painters worked anonymously, but later painters were identified, and many have become important in the history of art. Between 1305 and 1315, Giotto painted episodes from the life of Christ for the interior of the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy. He used color strikingly, as in the clash of harsh colors in the scene of Christ's betrayal by the kiss of Judas.

Duccio, like Giotto, continued to paint in the Byzantine style. His *Maestra* (1308–11) is a panel in the Cathedral of Siena, Italy; one side is covered with scenes from the life of Christ, including the temptation, the calling of Peter and Andrew, and the entry into Jerusalem.

## **Icons**

When Vladimir, the ruler of Kiev, converted to Christianity in 988, he chose Eastern Orthodoxy over the Catholic Church for his people's faith. Consequently, Russian and Ukrainian artists developed a tradition of icon painting in the Byzantine style.

Russian icons, painted on wood panels, portray scenes prescribed by church tradition. The most common biblical themes are portraits of Christ or of the Virgin Mary, called "Mother of God," with the infant Jesus.

Another common theme is the "Old Testament Trinity," which depicts Abraham's three angelic visitors (Genesis 18) seated around a meal that represents the Eucharist.

## **Key to Medieval Faith**

These examples illustrate the extent to which Christians in the Middle Ages were exposed to the events, characters, and teachings of the Bible, even when few of them could read it. In both worship and daily life, events from the life of Christ and other biblical scenes were present in sculpture, mosaic, and stained glass, in books, in drama, and in architecture.

These works of art show why historian Henri Daniel-Rops claimed that the first and most fundamental

characteristic of medieval religion was the influence of Holy Scripture.

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## When a Third of the World Died

**During the Black Death, the greatest catastrophe in human history, how did Christians respond?**

Mark Galli is editor of CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

In October 1347, when a Genoese trading ship fresh from the Crimea docked at a harbor in Sicily, dead and dying men lay at the oars. The sailors had black swellings the size of eggs in their armpits and groins, swellings that oozed blood and pus, and spreading boils and black blotches on the skin. The sick endured severe pain and died within five days of the first symptoms.

Other symptoms appeared in some of the next victims: continuous fever and spitting of blood. These victims coughed, sweated heavily, and died within three days or less—sometimes in 24 hours. No matter the symptoms, everything about the victims smelled foul, and depression and despair fell over them when they contracted the disease.

The disease, bubonic plague, was so lethal some went to bed well and died before morning; some doctors caught the illness at the patient's bedside and died before the patient.

Borne by ships traveling the coasts and rivers, by early 1348, the plague had penetrated Italy, North Africa, France, and crossed the English Channel. At the same time, it moved across the Alps into Switzerland and reached eastward to Hungary.

In a given area, the plague wreaked its havoc within four to six months and then faded, except in larger cities. There it slowed in winter only to reappear in spring to rage for another six months. In 1349, it hit Paris again and began spreading through England, Scotland, and Ireland as well as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Prussia, and Iceland, sometimes in chilling fashion. Off the coast of Norway, a ship drifted aimlessly offshore, finally grounding itself in Bergen. On boarding the ship, people discovered a load of wool and a dead crew.

By mid-1350, the plague had passed through most of Europe. The mortality rate ranged from 20 percent in some places to 90 percent in others. In many rural villages, the last survivors moved away, and the village sank back into the wilderness, leaving only grass-covered mounds. Overall the estimate of one medieval observer matches that of modern demographers: "A third of the world died." That would have meant about 20 million deaths.

In other words, from 1347 to about 1350, medieval Europe experienced perhaps the greatest calamity in human history. It shouldn't surprise us that this plague, or the Black Death as it is often called, left its mark on medieval Christianity. But in many cases, the mark it left looked as hideous as the symptoms of the Black Death itself.

### Deserting Loved Ones

In the beginning, people were merely astonished, and awed witnesses tended to exaggerate their reports. In Avignon, France, chroniclers put the death toll at 62,000 (and some at 120,000), although the city's population was probably less than 50,000. Exaggeration or not, the plague devastated cities and grand projects came to a standstill: in Siena, Italy, as the Black Death took more than half the inhabitants, work was abandoned on the great cathedral, planned to be the largest in the world.

The primary concern at first was burying all the bodies. When graveyards filled up, bodies at Avignon were thrown into the Rhone river until mass burial pits were dug. In London, corpses piled up until they overflowed out of the pits. Corpses were left in front of doorways, and the light of each morning revealed new piles of bodies.

Rather than encourage mutual aid, the plague's deadliness drove people from one another. One Sicilian friar reported, "Magistrates and notaries refused to come and make the wills of the dying," and worse, "even the priests did not come to hear their confessions." In one account called the *Decameron*, the author said, "One man shunned another ... kinsfolk held aloof, brother was forsaken by brother, oftentimes husband by wife; nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children to their fate, untended, unvisited as if they had been strangers."

Yet there were also pockets of extraordinary Christian charity. According to one French chronicler, the nuns at one city hospital, "having no fear of death, tended the sick with all sweetness and humility." New nuns replaced those who died, until most had died: "Many times renewed by death [they] now rest in peace with Christ as we may piously believe."

### **Appeasing God's Wrath**

To most people there was but one explanation for the calamity: the wrath of God. A scourge so sweeping had to be divine punishment for sin. One writer compared the plague to the Flood.

Efforts to appease God's wrath took many forms, but the most common were processions authorized at first by the pope. Some lasted as long as three days, and some were attended by as many as 2,000 (which, of course, just help spread the plague). Penitents went barefoot and wore sackcloth; they sprinkled themselves with ashes, wept, prayed, tore their hair, carried candles and relics. They wound through city streets, begging for mercy from Jesus, Mary, and the saints.

When the plague refused to abate, the processions moved from ceremonies of remorse to self-flagellation. The flagellants believed they were society's redeemers; they re-enacted Christ's scourging on their own bodies to atone for human sin.

Stripped to the waists, beating themselves with leather whips tipped with iron spikes until the blood flowed, groups of 200 to 300 (and sometimes up to 1,000), marched from city to city. They begged Christ and Mary for pity, and townspeople sobbed and groaned in sympathy. They performed three times a day, twice publicly in the church square and once in private.

They were organized under a lay Master for usually 33 1/2 days—to represent Christ's years on earth. They pledged self-support and obedience to the Master. They were not allowed to bathe, shave, change clothes, sleep in beds, talk or have intercourse with women without the Master's permission.

The movement quickly spread from Germany through the Low Countries to France. Hundreds of bands roamed the land, exciting already overwrought emotions in city after city. Inhabitants greeted them with the ringing of church bells and offered them hospitality. Children were brought to them to be healed. People dipped cloths in the flagellants' blood and pressed the cloths to their eyes and preserved them as relics.

The flagellants quickly grew arrogant and began overtly attacking the church. Masters began hearing confessions, granting absolution, and imposing penance. Priests who tried to stop them were stoned; opponents were denounced as Antichrists. The flagellants took over churches, disrupted services, ridiculed the Eucharist, looted altars, and claimed the power to cast out demons and raise the dead.

## **Murderous Atonement**

Then the self-torturers and other Christians turned their anxiety upon another group: the Jews. Jews were suspected of poisoning city wells, intending "to kill and destroy the whole of Christendom and have lordship over all the world." Lynchings began in the spring of 1348 following the first plague deaths. In France, Jews were dragged from their houses and thrown into bonfires.

Pope Clement VI tried to stop the hysteria. He said Christians who imputed the pestilence to the Jews had been "seduced by that liar, the Devil," and that the charge of well-poisoning and the massacres were a "horrible thing." He urged priests to take Jews under their protection as he himself offered to do, but his voice was hardly heard in the rush to find a scapegoat.

In one town, an entire community of several hundred Jews was burned in a wooden house especially constructed for the purpose. The 2,000 Jews of Strasbourg, France, were taken to the cemetery, where those who didn't convert were burned in rows of stakes.

Eventually church and state got the upper hand. When Clement VI called for their arrest, the flagellants disbanded and fled, "vanishing as suddenly as they had come," wrote one witness, "like night phantoms or mocking ghosts."

## **Angry Aftermath**

The plague broke out about once a decade over the next sixty years in various places. Yet for all the excess of sorrow and death, there were few profound lasting effects on society.

Some noted the sad effect on morals, "lowering virtue throughout the world." There was an orgy of greed with the glut of merchandise available in the aftermath. Peasants took unclaimed tools and livestock. The poor moved into deserted houses, slept on beds, and ate off silver. Lawsuits to gain deserted lands proliferated.

Others noted an improvement: many people living together got married, and swearing and gambling had so diminished that manufacturers of dice were turning their product into beads for saying prayers.

Higher education benefited. Emperor Charles IV felt deeply the cause of "precious knowledge which the mad rage of pestilential death has stifled throughout the wide realms of the world." He founded the University of Prague in the plague year of 1348. By 1353, three new colleges were founded at Cambridge, one of them funded by the income derived from masses for the dead.

The church was also enriched, first by the offerings of pilgrims who, in 1350, flocked to Rome seeking absolution from their sins. Also, a flood of bequests were made to religious institutions. In October 1348, the Council of Siena temporarily suspended its annual taxes for religious charities because these were so "immensely enriched and indeed fattened" by bequests.

But the church also garnered much criticism. Most clergy turned out to be as frightened and self-serving as the populace, some gouging people for their services during the crisis. This was severely condemned by Pope Clement VI and violently resented by the people. In Worcester, England, for example, citizens broke down the gates of a priory, attacked the monks, and tried to set fire to the buildings.

Wrote one contemporary, "When those who have the title of shepherd play the part of wolves, heresy grows in the garden of the church." Most people plodded on as before, but dissatisfaction with the church's behavior at a critical moment accelerated reform movements, which were to break out uncontrolled a century and a half later.



# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Warrior Spirituality

Princes and knights were expected to be men of noble character, military prowess, and deep Christian faith.

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Toward the end of the tenth century, Adalberon, bishop of Laon, wrote, "There is a noble class which comprises the warriors and protectors of the churches. They defend all the people, great and small, and, incidentally, protect themselves."

This class was no group of ruffians looking for a fight, at least not after the dynamic reformation that swept through Europe from roughly 1000 to 1300. Like the sixteenth-century Reformation, this movement sought to restore the values of the early church. In regard to the warrior class, it encouraged the rise of chivalry and the glorification of the Christian knight.

Though only an elite few became knights, nearly every medieval person had contact with them. Furthermore, the values of the ruling class, composed of princes and knights, permeated society.

## Servant Warriors

Bishop Adalberon also wrote this: "The city of God we believe is not only one but subdivided into three parts: some pray, others fight, and still others work.... The service of each allows the contributions of the other two. Each, in turn, lends its support to all."

If Adalberon's description of medieval society is too simple, everyone agreed that those "others" who "fight"—princes and knights—must protect their people against invasion and internal disorder.

Medieval people thought the house of God—church and society together—required strong governing. Bernard of Clairvaux, the Cistercian monk who led the early 1100s reform movement, wrote, "Where a multitude is gathered together without any contract of peace, without any observance of law, without discipline or a ruling head, it is called not a people but a mob, not a state but confusion." So a ruling class was necessary to keep order.

The ruling class was obliged first to seek the welfare and salvation of the people they ruled. Bernard's friend and younger contemporary, the scholarly John of Salisbury, wrote, "Between a tyrant and a good prince there is this single difference: the good prince obeys the law, and rules the people by its dictates, accounting himself as but their servant.... On the prince falls the burdens of the whole community. So there is rightly conferred on him ... power over all his subjects, so that he may seek and bring about the welfare of all and each."

The fate of princes and knights who did not live up to this standard was an example to all. As John of Salisbury put it, "To kill a tyrant is not only legitimate, but fair and just. For he who lives by the sword deserves to die by the sword."

Bernard found biblical inspiration for a fighting class in David, the warrior king of Israel. Warfare was seen as sometimes necessary. The crucial concern was motivation: the warrior must fight for God rather than

the world. Writing about Louis VII, who went on a crusade to the Holy Land, Bernard said, "Our king serves so that the King of heaven shall not lose his land, the land 'on which his feet have stood'" (Psalm 131:7).

Thus to battle in the service of God was a virtue. For Bernard, to kill without reason was homicidal; to kill for justice's sake was malicidal—the killing of evil.

## Chivalry

To fulfill the functions assigned him by society, the medieval warrior had to possess certain virtues. Foremost among these, of course, was military prowess. His role demanded not only great physical strength and skill, but also courage and steadfastness, integrity and loyalty, generosity and humility.

In the 1200s, missionary and philosopher Ramon Lull wrote a popular treatise on chivalry, which set forth some of the prerequisites for knighthood:

"We should ask the squire seeking knighthood whether he was ever guilty of falseness or treachery, both contrary to the order of chivalry. ... If a squire shows false pride in what he does, he is not worthy to become a knight. ... A squire who is a flatterer corrupts good intentions, and the nobility which is part of the knight's courage is thereby destroyed. A squire who is proud and schooled in evil, full of wicked words and misdirected bravery, avaricious, a liar and untrue, slothful or a glutton, perjured or afflicted with any like vice, is not acceptable to chivalry."

To help inculcate such virtues, the candidate was knighted in a simple ceremony dominated by Christian symbolism.

Ramon Lull advised, "Before a knight enters the order of chivalry, he must confess the sins he has committed against God. He must be determined to serve God, who is glorious. ... He should receive his Savior in the Lord's Supper. ... The squire should fast on the vigil of his knighting, ... should go to church and pray to God, keeping an all-night vigil of prayer, hearing the word of God and about the responsibilities of chivalry. He ought to kneel before the altar and lift up his corporeal and spiritual eyes to God and his hands to heaven. A knight should then gird him with his sword, the sign of chastity, justice, and charity. ... The new knight should ride through the town and show himself to the people ... thus acquiring still greater impetus to shun evil deeds."

***Noblesse oblige***, the idea that noble status imposes obligations, was celebrated in tales of knightly valor, hospitality, and service, which were nightly fare in the dining halls of the ruling class.

## Women and Love

Beginning in the 1100s, it was felt that young men needed more than training in warfare and statecraft, which they learned from the lord of the castle. From the lady of the castle, they needed also to receive religious and social education.

As part of his social education, the young knight learned to compose and sing poetry. The lady usually preferred lyric poetry, most often love lyrics.

Walther von der Vogelweide, a knight who lived in the years straddling 1200, wrote love lyrics emphasizing the nobility and Christian virtue of the lady. In one poem, he says,

***But when a lady, chaste and fair,***  
Noble and clad in rich attire,

Walks through the throng with gracious air,  
As sun that bids the stars retire,  
Then where are all thy boastings,  
O month of May?  
What hast thou beautiful and gay  
Compared with that supreme delight?  
We leave thy loveliest flowers,  
And watch that lady bright.

People in antiquity had seen marriage primarily as a convenience, in the 1100s and 1200s, romantic love between husband and wife became the norm. In a sense, romantic love was a medieval invention and in part, it arises out of knightly chivalry.

### **A Spiritual Calling**

In the mid-1200s, King Louis IX of France (the famous Saint Louis), wrote a letter to his son Philip summarizing the spiritual standards of the medieval knight and ruler.

Louis begins by pointing to Philip's relationship with God: "Fix your whole heart on God, and love him with your whole strength.... Shun everything which you believe is displeasing to him.... Should our Lord send you any prosperity ... you ought to thank him humbly for it, and you ought to be careful that you are not the worse for it, either through pride or any other vice.... Pray to God with heart and lips alike."

Louis then turns to the duties of rulers: "Have a heart full of loving-kindness for the poor.... Never oppress your people or burden them with taxes, except in an emergency.... Hold yourself steadfast and loyal toward your subjects.... If a poor man has a quarrel with a rich man, sustain the poor man rather than the rich until the truth is made clear, and, when the truth is made clear, do justice to both...."

Louis concludes with the ultimate motivation: "I pray our Lord Jesus Christ, by his mercy ... to guard and protect you from doing anything contrary to his will, and to give you the grace to do it always, so that he may be honored and served by you. And this may he do to me as to you, by his great bounty, so that after this mortal life we may be together with him in eternal life, and see him, love him, and praise him without end. Amen."

### **Ideal and Reality**

Medieval knights did not always behave in an exemplary Christian fashion. For example, the cult of romantic love often encouraged adultery, and one 1400s writer complained that knights set places on fire, robbed churches, and imprisoned priests.

But even the errant knight acknowledged how he should behave. One medieval story tells of a knight who had put away his wife and taken another woman. He demanded absolution from his pastor. He was sure his pastor would refuse; since the knight had no intention of taking back his wife, he approached the pastor with sword in hand.

The priest heard the knight's request but could not agree to the absolution. He simply accepted his fate and said to the knight, "Strike!"

The knight was taken aback and, after some hesitation, retreated. He said, "I hate you too much to send you straight to heaven!"

For all his refusal to behave according to Christian standards, the knight at least knew what they were,

and he believed in them.

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## Orthodoxy Wasn't Always Good Enough

The two most widespread medieval heresies

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"Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes" (Song of Sol. 2:15, KJV). Bernard of Clairvaux, perhaps the greatest preacher of his age, chose this as his text for a sermon series he gave against heresy in 1143. The vine was Christ's church, and the little foxes were the heretics who threatened the salvation of its members.

In Bernard's day, groups dissenting from Roman Catholicism began to appear, partly because they weren't happy with the type of Christianity taught by the church, and partly because of the church's call for reform. As popes railed against sins of the clergy, lay people became increasingly critical as well. By the 1100s, reformers, some for and some against the church, were gaining followings.

Those who broke away from the church were considered heretics. The concept is scriptural, designating those who substitute human opinion for the truths revealed by Christ (e.g., 2 Peter 2:1). Catholic medieval theologians, like Bernard, believed their church was the true guardian of Christ's teaching.

Those early separatist movements were a small but significant aspect of popular faith of the Middle Ages. They established a tradition of religious dissent that eventually included "proto-Protestants" like John Hus and John Wycliffe. Two dissenting groups less well-known, but whose movements were perhaps more widespread in the Middle Ages, were the Cathars and the Waldensians.

### The "Pure" Believers

The Cathar movement originated in the Greek and Slav lands of eastern Europe and took root in the West in the mid-1100s. **Cathar** is a Greek word meaning "the pure." Although the Cathars claimed to base their teaching exclusively on the New Testament, their basic creed was unusual: God is very good; in this world nothing is good. It therefore follows that God did not make anything that is in this world.

Cathars believed the material universe was created by an evil power, which had imprisoned angelic souls in physical bodies and condemned them to a perpetual round of reincarnation. The Good God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to rescue the imprisoned souls. But since matter is evil, Jesus was a spiritual being who had only the appearance of a body. Therefore, he could not have died on the cross and risen again.

In the Cathar view, Christ redeemed humankind by founding the Cathar church, to which he gave the Holy Scriptures and a single sacrament, "the consoling." It supposedly conferred the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands and was modeled on Catholic confirmation and on Acts 8:14–17. It was administered only to adults who had undergone a prolonged period of instruction, and it involved a complete change of life.

Those who received it were known as "the perfect." They severed family ties, renounced personal property, and abstained from sex. They prayed 15 times every 24 hours, and abstained from eating meat, poultry, eggs, butter, fat, or cheese.

Activities were regulated by the Cathar bishops, who commissioned some to be ministers and most to live in small, single-sex communities. Cathars earned their living by weaving or farming and devoted spare time to prayer and meditation.

Those who persevered were assured that at death their souls would be released from evil and reincarnation, and they would return to their true home in Paradise.

Although many people admired the austere Cathar life and believed its teachings, many were unwilling to adopt the lifestyle. Such people were known as "believers": they led ordinary lives, marrying, owning property, and eating what they liked. But when they were dying, they called for a Cathar perfect and were "consoled," thereby ensuring their ultimate salvation.

The Cathars recruited the perfect from all classes. Great ladies, like Philippa, Countess of Foix, laid aside wealth and status, and lived in Cathar communities in equality with poor peasant women.

Although the new religion was preached throughout Western Europe, it took root particularly in southern France and northern and central Italy. Its adherents were always in a minority, but by 1200, there were several thousand perfect and tens of thousands of believers.

### **The Waldensians**

The other main Catholic heresy started out as a reform movement within the church: the Waldensians.

Its founder, Peter Valdes (sometimes incorrectly spelled Waldo), was a rich merchant of Lyons who in 1173 felt a call to serve Christ in the poor. After making provision for his family, he gave the rest of his property away and gathered round him a group of like-minded lay people, who preached and ministered to the destitute.

At one point, his wife became distressed with his radical lifestyle, especially his begging for daily food; eventually she got the archbishop of Lyons to order her husband to go home each day to be fed by her.

Pope Alexander III gave his approval to Valdes's work on condition that he and his followers obtain licenses to preach from their bishops.

The early Waldensians did not differ from Roman Catholicism doctrinally, but when some of them were refused preaching licenses, they seceded and formed an independent church. They came to reject the Catholic priesthood and the Eucharist-centered worship. Instead, they held services devoted to preaching, prayer, and the reading of Scripture. It was at this point that the medieval Catholic church began considering the Waldensians heretics.

The Waldensians were one of few dissenting movements that allowed women to preach—which even further alienated them from the Catholic church. They attracted a substantial following in southern France and northern Italy, apparently an area of Europe ripe with people unhappy with medieval Catholicism.

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## Carrots and Sticks

How the Catholic Church responded to heresy

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The medieval Catholic church did not think toleration of doctrinal error a virtue, and it took decisive steps to correct heresy when it appeared.

### Persuade Them to Remain

First, the church supported Christian groups that remained loyal to Rome while living out some radical practices of heretics, practices that were both biblical and effective at reforming the church (which was one concern of many dissenters).

Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), for example, shared many of Valdes's ideals; Francis encouraged people to lead lives of Christian poverty and perfection. His friars were loyal Catholics, and in 1210 Pope Innocent III licensed them as a new religious order.

Francis was not centrally concerned about fighting heresy, but Dominic Guzman was. He founded the Dominicans, or the Friars Preacher, in 1217, specifically to deal with the Cathars, both by example (in a lifestyle of Christian poverty) and by teaching. A high proportion of Dominicans were university educated, and they evangelized cities and taught lay people orthodox Christian doctrine.

### The Darker Way

The church's other strategy was more severe: In 1227, Gregory IX introduced as an experiment something he called the Inquisition.

Inquisitors were appointed over districts and toured them seeking out heretics. Failure to attend an inquisitor's tribunal could lead to arrest.

The inquisitor's primary concern was to reconcile heretics to the church. If he succeeded, the heretic was dismissed with penance, such as making a pilgrimage or fasting on bread and water for so many days. This was the result for 90 percent of the people examined by the Inquisition.

However, there was a darker side to the tribunal's activities. Cathar believers who refused to recant, for example, were normally sent to prison until they changed their minds. Then, in 1252, Pope Innocent IV licensed the use of torture in the case of obdurate suspects. It wasn't to be used to force a heretic to recant (this must be a free act) but only to make him divulge information about the heretical group.

Convicted heretics who refused to recant were handed over to the secular authorities for punishment because it was believed unchecked heretical ideas posed a danger to society.

As a result of these and other factors, by about 1325, Catharism had disappeared from Western Europe. The Waldensians simply withdrew into remote parts of southern Italy and Germany, eventually to emerge as a Calvinist communion, and their church still exists today.

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## God's Glory in Wood and Stone

Intriguing facts behind one of medieval Christendom's magnificent legacies: The Cathedral.

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Cathedrals required massive amounts of building materials. To build just one tower of Ely Cathedral in England took more than 800,000 pounds of wood and lead. Every cathedral required thousands of trees, and in France, people complained about the great oak forests being leveled to supply lumber.

Building materials were often brought in from far away. Lumber, sometimes in pieces 60 feet long, might come from Scandinavia. The best limestone came from France. When Norwich Cathedral was built in England, the cost of shipping the stone from 300 miles away was twice as much as the cost of the stone itself. The vault of a cathedral might often be more than 150 feet above the floor. To construct it, builders worked on a new invention, scaffolding. When the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore was built in Florence, temporary restaurants and wine shops were built in the dome so workers would not have to make the exhausting trip down and up again.

A cathedral under construction attracted hundreds or thousands of workers. So that masons could work all winter, a lodge was built near the site—the origin of today's "masonic lodges."

European cathedrals always face east. That way, the priest at the main altar can pray toward Jerusalem, the Holy Land.

Cathedral spires were tall, thin, and extremely heavy because they were covered with sheets of lead. As a result, it was not unusual for a spire or bell tower to collapse, as one did in 1239 during a service at Lincoln Cathedral in England. A prayer used at Lincoln thereafter went, "Deare Lord, support our roof this night, that it may in no wise fall upon us and styfle us. Amen."

Stained glass took countless hours to create. Workers melted sand, lime, and potash; blew the molten glass into a cylinder; cut open and flattened that; cut the glass by using a hot iron and cold water; shaped smaller pieces with a pointed rod called a grozing iron; spread paint on the glass and then heated the glass so the paint would melt into it.

Though a stained-glass window might be 60 feet high, no single piece in it would be larger than eight inches wide or high.

Elaborately carved gargoyles served a purpose: as rain spouts to carry water away from the walls. Although usually carved in the shape of demons or monsters, gargoyles were sometimes carved to look suspiciously like the local bishop.

Cathedral floors were decorated with patterned tiles. Often they included a giant maze for people to walk through. The maze at Chartres Cathedral in France is more than 50 feet across.

Cathedrals were enormously expensive. To pay for them, bishops asked royalty for gifts, held trade fairs, put saints' relics on display (which people paid to see), or sold indulgences. Rouen Cathedral's southwest tower is known as "Tower of Butter," because it was paid for by selling indulgences that allowed people to eat butter during Lent.

Cathedrals included numerous sculptures. Chartres Cathedral, for example, has more than 2,000.

Cathedrals often took more than a hundred years to build. People who began one knew they would never live to see it finished. Often, the cathedral's dedication was celebrated by their grandchildren.

Cathedrals dwarfed their surrounding cities or towns. A mid-sized medieval town might have 5,000 people—and a cathedral like Chartres Cathedral in France could hold them all.

Because cathedrals took so long to build, many bishops spent their entire tenure holding church services in the middle of a huge construction site.

A cathedral is not simply a grand church building but a church of any size that holds the *cathedra*, the throne of the bishop.

Medieval architects sometimes built life-sized models for parts of a cathedral, making, for example, a huge wooden window frame and presenting it to masons to build it in stone.

Though built centuries ago, cathedrals are still among the largest buildings in the world. The spire of Strasbourg Cathedral in France reaches as high as a 45-story skyscraper; the cathedral stood as the tallest building in Europe until the Eiffel Tower was built last century.

To lift the heavy carved stones to the top of a cathedral, workers used winches, windlasses, and a "great wheel." The great wheel was a wooden wheel big enough for one or two men to stand inside; when they walked, the wheel turned an axle that wound up rope.

Despite the effort it took to build just one cathedral, in Europe in just 400 years, Christians built 500 cathedrals.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 49: Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages

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## Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: Christian History Interview - Stepping Into a Christian Culture

Medieval Christianity seems dark and foreign—until you take a closer look.

an interview with JOHN VAN ENGEN

*The medieval world conjures up all sorts of images, but it's the unusual ones that often stick in our minds: a woman kneeling at a saint's shrine, groups whipping themselves, monks wearing hair shirts—and on it goes.*

*Yet in spite of what seems eccentric to us, medieval Europe was a thoroughly Christian culture, and as such, it's a culture we should be able to understand, and one whose legacies we should be able to appreciate.*

*To talk about the "age of faith," Christian History spoke with John Van Engen, professor of history and head of the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana.*

**Christian History: What are some of the greatest misunderstandings modern Christians have about medieval religion?**

John Van Engen: First, they assume that Catholicism was a monolithic system, from pope down to individuals, and that it was this way for a thousand years. But from a.d. 500 to 1517, European Catholicism underwent enormous changes; there were periods of centralization and of decentralization.

Furthermore, in a world that had poor transportation, no televisions, and no telephones, the idea of a pope handing out orders that would be obeyed at the local level everywhere—well, that's something of a dream. When you think about medieval religion, you have to think in regional terms: Catholicism in southern France, in England, in northern Italy, and so on. Though the vast majority of Christians shared the same beliefs and some common forms of worship, there was great diversity in the Middle Ages.

Second, a great many moderns think medieval religion is mostly about "superstition," e.g., the cult of the saints, and people crossing themselves repeatedly.

**Why are such misunderstandings so common?**

Our image of the Middle Ages has been colored in two ways. First by Reformation preaching and teaching. Protestants tended to paint the Catholic Middle Ages in very black terms in order to justify the kind of radical changes they sought.

In addition, we are heirs of the Enlightenment much more than we realize. The Enlightenment exalted reason, and thus repudiated revelation, faith, religious ritual, and rote learning as ignorant superstitions. That has colored our ability to appreciate the medieval religious culture, which tried to base itself on revelation as much as reason.

**Rigorous fasting and self-flagellation seem eccentric. Were they?**

People in the Middle Ages had a strong sense they were to love God not just with their minds but also with their bodies. By disciplining the body and its passions, they believed they disciplined their souls, pleased God, and prepared themselves to receive grace.

That's why we see so much abstaining from sex, praying all night, walking barefooted several miles to a shrine.

They believed the truly Christian life involves a certain measure of self-denial, which includes the mortification of the flesh. Our

sinfulness lies not only in wills but also in passions gone astray. So you have to bring your whole bodily regimen in line with Christ.

It isn't enough to avoid punching your neighbor in the nose, you also have to rid yourself of anger. How do you discipline that? They had this idea (not so modern it turns out) that you get at the inner part of you through (a) prayer and confession and (b) disciplining the body—fasting, going on a pilgrimage, even torturing the body. In this way, they would repress or drive out things like lust, gluttony, and greed.

For many people, these activities became self-punishments or satisfaction for sin. To Protestants this is a misunderstanding of Christ's atonement. But there was also that other dimension of discipline that makes sense to most of us.

### **So if we just tried to understand medieval religion, we would identify with it more?**

Yes and no. Yes because whenever we try to understand another age, we come to appreciate some of its strengths. But no because there are many features Protestants will still find disturbing.

for example, take the cult of the saints. In addition to prayers to the Trinity and to Jesus, medieval people prayed to the saints, and in some instances this moved into worship of the saints. Or they would spend more time at a shrine of Mary than at their parish church.

### **What were the greatest challenges medieval priests faced in teaching people the Christian faith?**

Teaching an illiterate culture was one; helping people, most of whom did not understand Latin, appreciate the Latin Mass, was another. A third was eradicating superstition.

Before Christianity came to Europe, various forms of superstition and paganism were all that people knew. By 1100 much of Western Europe was formally converted, but pagan superstition had a way of hanging on. If you put yourself in the shoes of a medieval person, you can see why.

Let's say your wife is with child, and the pregnancy is going poorly. You're worried both mother and child could die during birth. You pray to Jesus, and more likely, you pray earnestly to Mary, who was thought to look out for women in difficult childbirth.

But also in your village, there's a woman who says, "Whenever we've had this problem, we boil certain herbs, lay them on the mother-to-be's tummy, and say a certain charm—and that really helps."

People didn't see this as contrary to their faith. It was like going to the drug store and getting a little extra help. But the priest had to try to convince people this was unhealthy spiritually.

### **What would have been some of the great successes of the medieval church in this regard?**

By the sixteenth century, all of Europe (apart from the Jews) was in principle Christian, and many people were devout believers—and all this in an extended area that a thousand years earlier had only a handful of Christians.

This produced a widespread ethical outlook. In spite of rampant illiteracy, the absence of radio and television, a poor system of transportation, and stubborn regionalism, there was a commonly shared understanding of how people should live and act. This is particularly amazing because today we assume that to teach moral standards to an entire culture requires strongly centralized government, mass communication, and literacy.

### **What are some of the legacies the medieval church has left us?**

There are a number of cultural legacies, like the modern university. The University of Paris, of Oxford, of Cambridge, and others were all founded in the Middle Ages. The medieval church was anxious to have an educated clergy who would in turn educate the laity. But there was also a drive to organize knowledge and understand the created universe, and this drive arises directly out of medieval theology.

There are also modern religious assumptions that arise out of the Middle Ages. For instance, we Christians assume that the culture around us ought to be Christian. This was not an expectation of the early church, which assumed the world around it would remain mostly hostile to the faith. But today many Christians are angry and frustrated when our culture is not Christian. That's a medieval world view.

Another modern assumption begun in the Middle Ages: the death of Christ should be at the center of Christian faith. We forget there are systems of Christianity with other emphases, like the Orthodox with their concern about the Trinity. The notion that the Christian faith hinges on the suffering and death of Christ, and the forgiveness of sin, is a special contribution of the western medieval church.

When the Reformers came along, they changed this theology in certain crucial ways, but they still assumed the central theme was the passion of Christ—not the Trinity or even the Resurrection.

**You allude to justification by faith. Was this doctrine forgotten in the Middle Ages?**

Medieval theologians taught that faith was an essential step in being made right with God. But at the popular level, people tended to take faith for granted. They grew up with it. Everybody they knew was a Christian. So they concentrated on good works.

In addition, they listened to the apostle Paul. He talks a great deal not only about faith but also about love, and the end of each of his letters is full of specific admonitions to do good works. So, for the medieval person, the central concern was on making faith manifest in love.

Once you begin worrying about whether your good works are good enough, you can soon drive yourself spiritually crazy. There's a lot of evidence of this kind of unhealthy intensity in the late Middle Ages.

**You've studied the Middle Ages for decades as a member of the Christian Reformed Church. How has it impacted your faith?**

I have a more balanced notion about the relationship of the mind and body, between the cognitive side of faith and the part that expresses itself in worship and ethics. I've been able to blend many medieval insights into a belief system that is still in essence Calvinist.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 49: Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages

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## Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: Recommended Resources

Books on the Middle Ages are legion, and even narrowing the field to books on everyday faith doesn't help much. The following represents a sampling of what's available—mostly books the editors found helpful while putting this issue together.

### Getting Oriented

Five hundred years of history covering an entire continent is no small chunk to bite off. To get your bearings, start with Joseph Lynch's *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (Longman, 1992) and Adriaan Bredero's *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Eerdmans, 1994).

A penetrating analysis of the medieval world's contribution to our own can be had in Christopher Dawson's classic *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (Doubleday, 1957, 1991). Barbara Tuchman's gripping narrative, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (Knopf, 1984), gives a great feel for the heart of this era.

### Everyday Life

Religion played a prominent role in all of medieval life, so it's helpful to read how people in the Middle Ages played games, went to market, raised children, and the like. Joseph and Frances Gies have produced the most accessible books in this area, including, *Life in a Medieval Village* (Harper & Row, 1990), *Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages* (1987), *Life in a Medieval Castle* (1974), and *Life in a Medieval City* (1969).

Other helpful books in this genre are *A History of Private Lives: Revelations of the Medieval World*, edited by Georges Duby (Harvard, 1988), which looks at how people created and used their living spaces, and Shulasmith Shahar's, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 1990).

### Everyday Faith

In terms of how and why people practiced Catholicism, one can hardly do better than Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (Yale, 1992), especially part one.

Overviews of this topic are provided by John Bossy in *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1985) and by Andre Vauchez in *The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices* (University of Notre Dame, 1993).

To discover why many people deviated from medieval Catholicism, see Malcolm Lambert's *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation* (Blackwell, 1977, 1992).

### Up Close and Personal

If you want to look at representative individuals, look at the character sketches in Eileen Power's

**Medieval People** (1924) and Norman Cantor's **Medieval Lives: Eight Charismatic Men and Women of the Middle Ages** (HarperCollins, 1994).

Geoffrey Chaucer's **The Canterbury Tales**, translated by Neville Coghill (Penguin, 1951, 1977), is not only a classic work of literature but a gold mine of historical insights into late-1300s England.

Finally, Norman Cantor, ed., in **The Medieval Reader** (HarperCollins, 1994) has gathered a nice selection of letters, essays, church documents, and poetry of the era.

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## Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages: History in the Making - Pentecost at Prime Time

**Early religious TV presented huge challenges, which Pentecostals met better than most.**

David Harrell is a professor of history at Auburn University in Alabama. He is author of "Oral Roberts: an American Life" (Indiana) and "Pat Robertson: A Personal, Religious, and Political Portrait" (Harper & Row).

"I saw this new thing called television," Rex Humbard later recalled, "and I said, 'That's it.' God has given us that thing ... the most powerful force of communication, to take the gospel into ... every state in the Union." The year was 1952, and Humbard was the first evangelical preacher to launch a successful television ministry out of his church in Akron, Ohio.

Evangelical preachers had taken to radio with gusto in the 1920s and 1930s. The leap from radio to television, however, was huge, and the pioneer evangelists who used the medium in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s faced enormous challenges.

### Mainline Opposition

Most religious programming of the early 1950s (with the exception of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's uniquely successful teaching program) was sponsored by the National Council of Churches. The programs were produced on low budgets and presented on Sundays in free time given by the networks to satisfy a public service requirement. The NCC was careful to see that none of the free time fell into the hands of evangelicals. In the early 1950s, Billy Graham purchased time to air an interview program, but few ever watched it.

Oral Roberts did see the Graham programs and was more and more convinced that "the devil must not steal this great medium from God's people." In 1954 Roberts and his wife, Evelyn, filmed a series of 30-minute studio programs patterned on his radio program, and they flopped. Roberts was subdued but not vanquished. He remained convinced that "more souls can be reached through TV than through any other means." What was needed, Roberts believed, was to capture on camera the charged atmosphere of the revival tent.

Two evangelical revivals were underway in the United States in the 1950s. The first was the evangelical revival led by Billy Graham. The second was a healing revival that drew hundreds of thousands into tents and auditoriums across the country seeking miracles. Its most talented leader was Oral Roberts.

In 1954 when Roberts took his big tent to Akron, Ohio, for a crusade, his old friend Rex Humbard persuaded him to film three of the evening meetings. The filming posed technical challenges because of the poor lighting under the tent, but Roberts was ecstatic about the results. The programs included not only his sermons but also the "altar calls, healing lines, actual miracles, the coming and going of the great crowds, the reaction of the congregations." He believed he had found a way to introduce the nation to the remarkable healing revival.

Billy Graham took a similar step in 1957 when he decided to air his Saturday-evening services from the Madison Square Garden crusade in New York City. Graham contracted with ABC to air four programs, establishing a pattern of broadcasting crusade services he would follow throughout his career.

Graham's stature was sufficient by 1957 to make him an attractive client to network television, but other evangelical broadcasters found the going much tougher. The television networks and most station owners were satisfied to donate Sunday morning time to the National Council of Churches, and many stations feared that selling time to revivalists would taint their image.

Oral Roberts painstakingly pieced together a television network in the mid-1950s; by 1957 he claimed that his program was being aired on 135 of the nation's 500 television stations. But he met resistance at every turn. When his program first aired in New York City, *New York Times* columnist Jack Gould protested, "If Brother Roberts wishes to exploit hysteria and ignorance by putting up his hands and yelling 'Heal,' that is his affair. But it hardly seems within the public interest, convenience and necessity, for the TV industry to go along with him."

The *Christian Century* warned that "the Oral Roberts sort of thing" would harm the "cause of vital religion," and throughout 1956, the NCC lobbied Congress seeking legislation banning the sale of television time for religious purposes.

Airing a national television program was expensive, but the rewards were enticing. Roberts's mail nearly doubled after one month on television; his mailing list grew to more than a million names by the end of the 1950s. Billy Graham began receiving between 50,000 and 75,000 letters each week in the wake of his New York City telecasts.

Every up-and-coming evangelist in the 1950s dreamed of launching a national television program to broaden his or her evangelistic ministry. "The people that's on radio and television," mused old-timer W.V. Grant, "is the ones that's getting the crowds." But no one came close to matching the national television empires of Graham and Roberts in the 1950s.

## Sixties Revolution

Religious television changed dramatically in the 1960s; by the end of the decade, the dimensions of the modern electronic church were beginning to appear.

Some changes were driven by technology. Independent UHF television stations proliferated, and these struggling business ventures were quite willing to provide low-cost time to evangelical customers.

One such station, WYAH, was a shoestring operation begun by young Pat Robertson; in 1961 it became the first all-religious television station in the country. Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network barely survived the early 1960s, but by 1968, CBN had built a new headquarters and had begun an incredible upward spiral that paralleled the secular broadcasting success of Ted Turner.

As technology opened new doors, the most creative evangelists experimented with new ways to use the medium. CBN contributed much to the remodeling of religious television. Robertson began using telethons to raise financial support in 1963, but his most important breakthrough came with the revising of *The 700 Club* format in 1965. Young Jim Bakker joined CBN in 1965 and began hosting the show now modeled on *The Tonight Show*. The talk show format attracted audiences far different from those who tuned in to crusade services.

In the late 1960s, Oral Roberts brooded about how to reach a broader audience. In 1967 and 1968, he made a series of stunning decisions: he canceled his television program, ended his crusade ministry, and left the Pentecostal Holiness church to become a Methodist.

Roberts had a strategy that would dramatically influence the course of modern religious television. In 1969 he prepared four prime-time specials produced in an entertainment format, featuring wholesome and talented student singers from Oral Roberts University and recognizable Hollywood guest stars. The scheme

was a high-stakes gamble (cost: \$3 million), but it was an effort to move religion out of the Sunday morning religious ghetto. The artistic team that put the programs together was headed by Ralph Carmichael, a talented musical writer, director, and arranger, and Dick Ross, who had produced specials for Billy Graham, Kathryn Kuhlman, and secular artists. The early programs claimed audiences of around 10 million viewers (a 1973 special had an estimated audience of more than 37 million), and after each program, the ministry received around a half-million letters.

A new generation of television evangelists soared to ever loftier heights in the 1970s; they owed much to Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson. Kathryn Kuhlman began broadcasting in 1967 with Dick Ross as her producer; Robert Schuller aired his first program in 1970, and Jimmy Swaggart his in 1972. In the 1970s, Robertson's booming CBN was joined by the TBN network, owned by Paul Crouch, and PTL, under Jim Bakker.

### **Why the Pentecostals?**

By the end of the 1960s, it was clear that evangelists from the Pentecostal/charismatic movement had been particularly adept in adapting to television—Roberts, Robertson, Bakker, Swaggart, Humbard, Kuhlman, Kenneth Copeland, and dozens of aspiring stars.

The reasons were partly organizational. The Pentecostal revival of the 1950s and 1960s left behind scores of independent ministries with the financial ability to test their appeal on television. Hundreds of talented and daring evangelists heard the voice of God telling them to take the gospel to the world through the miracle of television. Yet, though many were called, few were chosen.

The medium itself did much to determine winners and losers. Pentecostal evangelists had several advantages in the new world of televised communication. First, many were talented musicians and their religious subculture had deep roots in the music of common people. They were able and willing to offer entertainment on television as they had under their tents. Second, they brought a clear-cut, simple theology to a medium that communicated in ten-second sound bites. Complicated and nuanced theology belonged to the days of print; Oral Roberts's concise insights—"God is a good God," "Something good is going to happen to you," "Expect a miracle"—were memorable television slogans.

By 1970 the ground rules for the expansion of the electronic church were pretty well in place. Established churches were unable and unwilling to compete with the freewheeling entrepreneurs who built independent television empires. Graham and Roberts continued to be major players in the decades ahead, but the competition became increasingly fierce and the stakes incredibly high; some of the newcomers were more talented than the pioneers. By the 1980s, near euphoria reigned amidst the stars of religious television. The next reassessment came only in the aftermath of the scandals at the end of that decade.