

The church in Britain in the Middle Ages

The Middle Ages are not strictly defined, but the term is usually applied to the period from the collapse of Roman civilisation in the 5th century up to around the 13th to 15th centuries. That is a large chunk of our history and we cannot look at it in detail in 5 minutes, but can only highlight a few topics and trends.

One of these is the role of the monasteries, which at the beginning of the period were not closely linked with society, although travelling monks were responsible for most of the spread of the gospel. However, as the monasteries grew they acquired land and status, became more lax spiritually and underwent changes in fortune as many were destroyed and their monks killed or enslaved during the Viking and Danish invasions from the end of the 8th century onwards. When the monasteries were rebuilt they tended to be more isolated, closed communities and by the 12th century monasticism began to decline again.

At their height, the monasteries in particular and the church in general were bastions of scholarship. Much of the population was illiterate and church schools were almost the only forum for education. Notable was the Venerable Bede, a renowned theologian and historian who lived in the late 7th and early 8th centuries, and monasteries like Lindisfarne were responsible for beautiful illuminated manuscripts of the Scriptures.

With learning came power and influence, not only spiritually but politically, culturally and financially. The clergy were almost the only literate, educated people, so they were appointed to administrative and court positions and it became difficult to distinguish between church and state, with no separation of ecclesiastical and civil law. The church gained land and wealth through royal gifts and enforced tithes from the people, which often caused the poor great hardship. In a strange twist, some rulers of English kingdoms such as Wessex and Mercia abandoned their thrones to become monks and undertake pilgrimages to Rome.

In all this the church developed into more of an institution, with worship becoming more formalised; prescribed orders of service; books of sermons produced for clergy unable to write their own; new ceremonies such as ordination introduced; infant rather than believer's baptism becoming the norm, largely because death in childhood was common; buildings acquiring more importance as stone churches were built; and a growing distinction between clergy and laity, partly because Latin was still generally used in worship. As all this happened, individual churches and monasteries lost their independence and became subject to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and by the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 the parish system covered most of Britain.

Towards the end of the period the influence from continental Europe increased. Even before the Norman Conquest, King Edward the Confessor originated from Normandy and introduced his countrymen into high offices in the church, and after the Conquest the English church was reformed to be more closely aligned with Rome under the authority of the Pope. This led to conflict as bishops and kings fought for power and it ultimately resulted in greater separation of the spiritual and the secular, although ecclesiastical law still governed large areas of everyday life and the church became increasingly rich and powerful. One outcome of this combination of power and religion was the Crusades in the 12th and 13th centuries, as people sought to amalgamate their desire for conquest with what they considered to be a sacred calling to reclaim the Holy Land for Christendom.

But there were already seeds of protest, as people like John Wycliffe in the 14th century attacked some of the central doctrines of the Mediaeval church such as transubstantiation (the belief that the bread and wine in Communion actually become the body and blood of Christ) and the separation between priests and people. He also initiated a translation of the Bible into English. Although this was suppressed and Wycliffe was ostracised, he helped to pave the way for the 16th century Protestant Reformation which was to have such a huge effect on Christianity in Britain up to this day – but that is another story for another occasion.