



4 THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY

THIS CHAPTER ASKS

How big an impact did Christian beliefs have on people's lives?
Did religious ideas change during the Middle Ages?
What was it like to be a nun?

MEMBERS OF CHRISTENDOM

Almost everybody living in Britain in the Middle Ages would have described themselves as members of the Christian Church. The exception would have been the fairly small community of Jewish people. But in 1290 King Edward I forced them to leave England, taking only what they could carry with them. For years they had been badly treated. Jews were distrusted because they were not Christians and were often attacked and sometimes killed. They were forced to give loans and gifts of money to the king and only allowed to do the unpopular work of money lenders. This was unpopular with many people because they had to pay back to the Jews more money than they had borrowed from them.

All the Christian people were members of one Christian group – the Catholic Church – whose leader, called the pope, lived in Rome. Most people across Europe were also members of the Catholic Church. Along with other Christians in the Middle East they made up *Christendom*, the name for the great community of all Christians.

THE CHURCH OF GOD

The Medieval Church was powerful, rich and well organised. It united rich and poor, old and young. It had its own language, Latin, which had once been the language of the Roman Empire. This became the language used in Church services and was the language used by all educated people in Europe. The Church ran all education and the first universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, were originally run by the Church. It even had its own laws (called Canon Law) and courts which looked after the running of the Church and punished people who disobeyed the leaders of the Church.

Everyone went to church and there were many services in the week and a great many churches. In York there was one church for every 243 inhabitants and this was not unusual. The people who ran the services in these churches were **priests**.

NEW WORDS

ABBEY/MONASTERY: place where monks and nuns worship God, away from the world.
PRIEST: a person who led Church services and looked after the local church.
SAINT: a dead, holy person who was thought to help answer prayers.
SIN: wrong doing deserving punishment in Hell. God would judge sinners.

SOURCE A

We curse them sleeping, or walking. That the pains of Hell shall be their drink with Judas who betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ and they shall be taken out of the Book of Life until they change their ways.

▲ *From a Medieval service of 'Excommunication'. This was thought to cut a person off from the Church and from God. It was done to people who had rebelled against the Church.*

In 1381 there were over 29,000 clergy in England. This was one for every fifty people in the country! The same proportion today would come to over one million.

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY

Medieval Christians believed their priests had the power to act for God to forgive, or punish their **sins**. Priests were not supposed to marry, although some lived with women as if they were their wives. Altogether, there was a huge group of people who helped run the church and who were known as the 'clergy', or 'clerks'. Some, like priests and also monks and nuns in **monasteries**, were not allowed to marry. Others who were called 'clerks in minor orders' included those who cared for church buildings, helped run the Church organisation and even every university student. These 'clerks in minor orders' could marry and could work outside the Church.

In the fourteenth century about a quarter of all the land in England was owned by the

Church. Rich people gave land to the Church to please God. The money from this land helped pay for the running of the Church. It was said that if the Abbot of Glastonbury Abbey married the Abbess of Shaftesbury Abbey, then their child would be richer than the king of England! Of course, they were not really allowed to marry. This was a Medieval joke.

The Christian message of the Church gave people in the Middle Ages - as today - hope in life after death, a belief that life had a purpose, advice on living a good and loving life and the comfort of believing that God loved and would help them. Medieval Christians also believed that they could pray to the Virgin Mary and to **saints** to help them too.

SOURCE C

Christ's rules and his apostles twelve, He taught – but first he followed it himself.

▲ *From the fourteenth century poem, the Canterbury Tales, by Geoffrey Chaucer. Here he describes a poor priest who spends his life lovingly serving his people.*

SOURCE B



▲ *A painting from 1450. It shows sinners being punished in Hell.*

Q 1. Look carefully at Sources A and B. How does this evidence help explain why the Church was so powerful in the Middle Ages.
2 'The Church was not only powerful because people were afraid of going to Hell. It was also powerful because it helped them live their lives.' Using Source C and any other information you can find, explain why this statement is true.

Discussion Point

What is the most important belief you have? Why is this belief so important to you?