
UNIT 7 RELIGION AND CULTURE IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE*

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

A previous Unit (**Unit 3, BHIC-104**) on religion in the Roman empire showed how Christianity at the close of antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages, was part of the state power structure. Christian churches, monasteries and church-administered establishments amassed land and controlled large numbers of labourers on the church estates across the former Roman realm. In addition to grants of land, churchmen received donations of wealth from royal coffers, from the nobility and from other members of society. This was only one aspect of the complex process of Christianization of European societies. As we shall see, the general social and cultural pattern of medieval Europe became Christian, even for the minority populations of Europe that were not Christian. Culture means a society's values, shared beliefs and traditions, as well as specific arts, languages, and so forth. An account of medieval European culture should therefore examine the whole pattern of medieval life and the ways that Christianity aided social integration and made possible the distinctive feudal structure of social control. Although Europe was never a single political unit during the medieval period and was an assemblage of societies, it is possible to make useful generalizations about religion in relation to 'European society' and 'European culture'. After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- understand Christianization as a socio-cultural process in medieval Europe,
- comprehend relations between 'majority' and 'minority' religious identity groups in parts of Europe,
- perceive the role of the clergy in Christian Europe before c. 1500, especially in knowledge formation, education and social care functions, and

* Prof. Denys P. Leighton, School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi

- list some of the reasons for cooperation and conflict between clergy and common people over medieval social life and institutions.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

By the eleventh century CE ‘Europe’ was synonymous with ‘Christendom’, the realm of Christianity, despite the rootedness of Christian worship practices in several parts of Asia and Africa. At that point in time Christendom was a conception more familiar to most people of medieval Europe than the concept of Europe itself (Where, after all did the borders of ‘Europe’ begin and end?). The identification of Europe with Christendom became even closer over the 12th and 13th centuries, when successive popes authorized Crusades.

Crusades were military expeditions under ‘the sign of Christ’s cross’ that were carried against infidels and heretics in the ‘Holy Lands’ (Jerusalem and surrounding places) as well as within Europe. Crusades were aggressive attempts of European nobles to increase their power and wealth under the guise of religious duty, but it was with the Pope’s authorization that these ferocious campaigns were launched (For more information on Crusades, refer to Instructional Video Recommendations).

The domain of the Pope, the Papacy, expanded outward from Rome during the Middle Ages as a vast empire of properties and territorial-legal jurisdictions. Civil rule in Europe depended for its legitimacy on the Christian churches and Papal consent. At the same time, popes and their subordinates were dependent on royal support and favour. The Christian New Testament stated (in Luke 22:38) that temporal authority (in social and political relations) and spiritual authority are represented by two swords and *both* swords are held by the prince or emperor. Breaches between civil leaders and the sanctioning Christian authorities were serious political crises wherever they occurred in medieval Europe. Christian theologians and lawyers developed theories of holy war and debated circumstances justifying violence, whether against non-Christians or fellow Christians.

Christianization of society was more than a process of people coming to worship the Christian deity (in the three-fold form of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) in similar ways. Christianity determined social values and norms of a diversity of peoples distributed over many hundreds of separate states and territories in Europe. When we observe today magnificent medieval church architecture and appreciate the murals, paintings and statues of religious subjects that adorned European palaces as well as churches, it is tempting to conclude that European culture exemplified the devotion to Christ and the saints that the Church taught as the duty of every Christian. Much of the art of medieval Europe was in the churches, and the churches were open to the common people.

Historian Henry Adams (1838-1918) in *The Education of Henry Adams* (Chapter 25: ‘The Dynamo and the Virgin’) compared medieval Europeans’ veneration of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, to modern peoples’ obsession with technology (for example, the dynamo, used to generate electricity), scientific progress and economic production. Adams wanted to show that medieval European men and women were convinced of the power of the Virgin Mary and did not dispute the importance of the rituals, cathedrals and other trappings of the Church – just as modern people are convinced of the importance and ultimate meaning of technology and economic accomplishment. However, many other scholars have challenged the impression that medieval Europeans were more religious and more Christian

than their Roman predecessors or than their successors after 1600 CE. The next sections of this Unit shall show how Christianity influenced medieval European social interactions, and how Christian ideas and values as well as anxieties about Christian practices were expressed in European culture and society. The Unit will also show how relations between Christians and other religious communities played out in the sphere of culture.

7.2 CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF EUROPE

Christianity, whether Roman Catholicism or the Orthodox Christianity upheld by the Eastern Roman or Byzantine empire (and represented by a Patriarch), was by the eighth century CE the official religion of most territories of southern, western and central Europe. Soon after that it spread into parts of Russia and Ukraine, and much of south-eastern Europe that was inhabited by Greek-speaking and Slavic people and was by then already home to Orthodox Christianity. Relations between Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christianity had deteriorated for several centuries before ending in a ‘Great Schism’ (split) in the late eleventh century CE. Christian missionaries of the early medieval period worked to spread their faith among the people as emissaries of the Pope (or the Orthodox Patriarch), or of the bishops theoretically subordinate to the Pope (or the Patriarch).

Conversion would not have progressed across medieval Europe without the support of the civil rulers. It was usually a political leader’s acceptance of Christianity that led to the conversion of the whole population. Legends around missionaries such as Patrick in Ireland (St. Patrick, ‘the Apostle of the Irish’) and Beuno in Wales and Brittany, as well as historical records like the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by the monk Venerable Bede (c. 672-735 CE), are filled with stories about missionaries’ intense conviction, their patience in adversity and the miraculous events surrounding their lives. Many of the early Christian saints were missionaries who experienced martyrdom at the hands of infidels. These kinds of legends and documents reveal something about persuasion and perceptions of advantage in adopting Christianity. In the mid-ninth century CE, Boris, *khan* of the Bulgars, received Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic missionaries but ultimately chose to align his state with Orthodox Christianity. Vladimir ‘the Great’, Slavic prince of Novgorod and eventually grand prince of Kiev in the late tenth century CE, allied with the Byzantine empire by marrying a daughter of the Byzantine emperor, and he accepted Orthodox Christianity in the bargain. Vladimir’s political alliance with the Byzantines thus began the Christianization of Russia, after several less successful missionary drives.

Christianization was a gradual process of transformation of society and culture and it continued long after the nominal conversion of a population to the Christian faith. When Christian proselytizers had the support of a ruler, Christianization carried with it the spoken or unspoken threat of violence to those who resisted conversion or who continued their pagan ways. Christian authorities were not content with the mere co-existence of their faith with non-Christian practice; they sought to establish the *societas fidei* (Latin: society of one faith). This meant complete dominance of Christianity over the people and condemnation of other faiths. The legal-political systems of the European lands upheld the Christian teachings and values, sometimes very harshly and deliberately against pagan or ‘infidel’ practices. Marriages among

rich as well as among poor Europeans were solemnized by priests. A marriage not recognized by the Church would cause problems in matters of control of property and inheritance of social and political status.

Christianization cannot be understood simply as a result of the already existing power of the Church. It happened because it fulfilled or at least promised to serve social needs of the various populations of Europe. The Church provided not only sacraments by which infants, children and adults were blessed or 'absolved' of sin but rituals to protect crops and herds from harm, and to thank God for the recovery of people from illness. That so many written prayers of thanks for the recovery or rescue of kings survive from medieval Europe indicates something about the interdependence of Church and royalty. People not only attended masses (ceremonies) in church and received sacraments from the **clergy**; they also worshipped at the shrines of saints and called upon saints for protection and assistance.

The most important saint for all Christians was Mary, mother of Christ, but people in all of Europe's Christian regions came to recognize several dozen saints. Saints were associated with protection from specific illnesses and misfortunes, or they were recognized as sponsors or patrons of certain professions (or of towns or countries). For example, St. Hubert was the patron of hunters, St. Christopher was the protector of travellers, and St. Nicholas became Russia's (national) patron saint¹. Pilgrimages to graves of saints or other holy sites became an established practice of Christians at all levels of society. Tales ('lives') of the saints became the most widely known form of literature in early medieval Europe, probably more familiar to most people before the 15th and 16th centuries than the Bible itself. The general level of European literacy was low, and the Bible was more often read out by clergy in church services than read by people as a book, while saints' tales circulated not only in written form but as oral legends.



Figure 7.1: Jan Hus and the Council of Constance

Credit: Karl Friedrich Lessing (1808-1880); Stadel Museum

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/25/Hus_%28Lessing_1842%29.jpg

¹ Nicholas also became the patron saint of children, and in the late Middle Ages he was associated with secret gifts to children on St. Nicholas Day, in December.



Figure 7.2: Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont

Credit: Jean Colombe, Bibliotheque nationale de France

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Clermont#/media/File:Passages_d'outremer_Fr5594_fol._19r_Concile_de_Clermont.jpg

To discipline those people who fell into ‘error’, the medieval Church had several means at its disposal, including religious courts, tribunals, commissions and acts of prohibition (for instance, preventing scholars from teaching or writing). Councils of principal clergy occurred from time to time since the earliest Christian centuries to handle widespread disagreement among the Christian authorities themselves. A great council at Constance² occurred in the early fifteenth century following decades of disruption when there were competing popes at Rome and Avignon. Religious dissenters or deviants and indeed anyone who opposed the Church’s teachings or pronouncements could be punished or executed, with the ultimate penalty being excommunication. By being placed outside (‘ex’) the community of true Christians, and denied the sacraments, excommunicated persons faced the threat of eternal damnation (their souls would not go to heaven). St. Peter, the first bishop of Rome, was represented in Christian iconography – religious art and symbolism – as holding the keys to the gate of heaven. The threat of excommunication persuaded the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV to defer to Pope Gregory VII during the 11th century ‘Investiture Controversy’ over the question of whether kings or instead the Pope should appoint bishops.

Through heresy trials – inquiries about renunciation or contradiction of approved Church teachings – the Church’s place in the social order was reaffirmed, whether or not the accused were condemned as heretics. The aforementioned Crusades complicated

² The Council of Constance was held between 1414 and 1418 in the Bishopric of Constance. The main purpose of the Council was to end the Papal schism. It was attended by 29 cardinals, 100 ‘learned doctors of law and divinity’, 134 abbots, and 183 bishops and archbishops. It facilitated the execution of Jan Hus (a Czech theologian, philosopher, master, dean and rector of the Charles University of Prague who became a Church reformer).

relations between Christians and Muslims for many centuries after the first of these violent campaigns was launched in 1095 CE by Pope Urban II. Yet Crusades were not narrowly anti-Islamic activities; they were directed too against pagans within Europe (such as the 'Northern Crusade' in the region around the Baltic Sea) and to eliminate Christian sects, such as the Cathars and the Waldensians in southwestern Europe, that the Papacy had deemed heretical. Jan Hus (1369-1415), a theologian and university professor and rector in Prague, was tried and executed for heresy, and several crusades were then launched in Bohemia (central Europe) until 1436 to subdue the Hussites. Medieval Europeans dreaded censure of the clergy. The reason was that they actually believed that the Pope could bind or loose the gates of heaven. Another reason could be because they feared loss of recognition in society that occurred with the religious authorities' disapproval. It is difficult to conclude which of these created more fear. What is more certain is that the Church held power to influence individuals' reputations among their fellow men and women — as people worthy of respect or, in contrast, people to be avoided or ignored.

While the region recognized today as Europe became Christian, Christian culture mixed with and often built upon pagan and non-Christian practices. **Unit 3** has shown how Jewish, Greek and Eastern ideas and practices helped form Roman and Orthodox Christianity. Pagan, 'barbarian' influences on the formation of 'Christian' Europe are much evident. One of the use of fir trees and branches in the celebration of Christmas in Germanic and northern Europe, is an adoption of a pagan tradition of decorating their homes with the branches of this tree. It was a medieval practice that has spread to Christian communities world-wide in modern times. Some pagan holy men and women, or even deities, were still recognized in popular faith practice across Europe and were occasionally re-named as Christian saints. Some Christian saints became associated with particular qualities or 'powers' of banned pagan deities or holy people. For example, Walburga or Walpurga, who was born in England in the eighth century CE and went missionizing in what is now Germany, may have been recognized as a Christian saint as a surrogate for the Grain Mother (a Germanic goddess, analogous to the Roman goddess Ceres). The earliest illustrations and statues of St. Walpurga show her holding stalks of grain, and this among other evidence indicates that German peasants came to regard her as the special saint for flourishing and ripening of grain.

By creating saints in ways that gave them connections to local values (and pagan practices), the Church was able to acquire tighter grip over the population it was Christianizing. Another strategy was to revise pagan festivals and incorporate them into the calendar of Christian holidays and ritual observances. When Christian authorities created a holiday — for example, a saint's day — to coincide with a pagan festival, they imagined that the counter-attraction would result in the pagan practices being ignored and eventually forgotten, and this is in fact what often happened. In the medieval popular imagination, the cults of saints filled in for the holy men and women who had



Figure 7.3: Saint Walpurga
Credit: Master of Messkirch
(1500-1543); Philadelphia
Museum of Art
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heilige_Walpurga.jpg

been important in pagan Europe. Moreover, while it was the Church that created saints through formal processes (called beatification and canonization), this was done to some extent in response to popular habits of piety and veneration. Lay people as much as clergy had power in establishing and preserving the cults of saints. It is significant that, as late as the 16th century, Frederick III ('The Wise'), Duke and Elector of Saxony (in Germany), had a reliquary – a private museum – containing about 19,000 relics (holy objects) associated with Christian saints. Canterbury in England hosted several shrines of saints and Santiago de Compostela in Iberia was a centre of veneration of St. James, the first of Christ's apostles to be martyred. These were among the popular pilgrimage sites of medieval Europe and even relatively poor people visited them to acquire holiness.



Figure 7.4: Canterbury Cathedral
Credit: Hans Musil

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Canterbury_Cathedral_-_Portal_Nave_Cross-spire.jpeg



Figure 7.5: Santiago de Compostela Cathedral
Credit: stephenD

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santiago_de_Compostela_Cathedral#/media/File:Catedral_de_Santiago_de_Compostela_agosto_2018_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santiago_de_Compostela_Cathedral#/media/File:Catedral_de_Santiago_de_Compostela_agosto_2018_(cropped).jpg)

Christianity was consolidated throughout Europe between c. 600 and 1000 CE as tribal societies in several regions coalesced in wider kingdoms. Pagan masculine ideals, including the pre-Christian Roman gender models, glorified the politically active men. In contrast, early Christian teachings promoted the contemplative (thoughtful) and ascetic (frugal and unsensual) life. Withdrawal from the affairs of a sinful world was a powerful ideal in the world of late antiquity, as can be seen from the historical evidence of religious hermits and mendicants (women as well as men). Masculinity in European pagan societies was highly sociable and martial. Men were expected to participate in assemblies and contests called by their chieftains or kings; they had to be skilled in weaponry and to demonstrate their courage in battle. We find evidence of conflict between Christian and pagan values in several parts of early Christian Europe. For example, **feudal** lords in 7th-8th century France criticized bishops, priest and monks as effeminate, weak and devious. Clerical celibacy and the belief that people could remain spiritually pure by being unmarried and unhampered by familial obligations were contrary to ideals of masculinity *and* femininity in most pre-Christian European societies.

This clash of values aside, Christianity did a great deal to shape feudal relationships across Europe. Loyalty of the feudal vassal (who held land) to his lord (who granted the land) was the keystone value of feudal relations, and Christianity helped make this an iron-clad and reciprocal duty. The code of **chivalry**³ that regulated life in the noble

³ The Code of Chivalry or Chivalric Code is an informal code of conduct that was developed between 1170 and 1220 but was never expressed in a single document. It arose in medieval Europe with its roots in the idealization of cavalryman of the Roman Empire.

courts throughout much of Europe from the eleventh century CE demanded fidelity to the 'true faith', mercy and charity towards the less powerful members of society, a strict sense of honour in personal relations and generally upholding 'good' as defined by Christian authorities. Churchmen in medieval Europe congratulated themselves for taming Europe's barbarian chieftains and their farmer-warrior followers, bringing, they said, Godly order and Christian peace as well as a stable system of agrarian relations. It must also be recognized that the Christian establishment provided care for the poor and the sick through hospitals, alms-houses (living places for the physically disabled poor and aged people without relatives) and through other forms of charity — charity being one of the core Christian duties exercised by clergy and common people alike.

7.3 CHRISTIANS' RELATIONS WITH NON-CHRISTIANS

Exceptions to the pattern of dominance by the Church before the late Middle Ages were north-eastern Europe (parts of Scandinavia and the Baltic region) and Iberia (Spain and Portugal). Until about 1100 CE Christianity had only a very weak hold in Scandinavia and Baltic Europe, where German and Polish Christian knights waged the 'Northern Crusade'⁴ for about a century. The more significant example of resistance to Christianization – perhaps better described as a different pattern of Christianization – was Iberia until 1492, where several states were ruled for many centuries by Muslim kings and emirs subordinate to the Umayyad, Abbasid, Almoravid and Almohad caliphates based in Damascus, Baghdad and Morocco (Africa). 'Moors' (Spanish: *moros*) moved into Iberia from North Africa in the seventh century and mixed with the local populations that were partly Christianized during the late Roman period. In the region called al-Andalus, which included the Emirate (and later Caliphate) of Córdoba, Christianity legally co-existed with Islam and Judaism. In Islamic law, Jews and Christians are 'people of the book'. Muslims regard the Jewish Old Testament and the Christian New Testament as true but incomplete revelations leading up to the Prophet Mohammed; and Jews and Christians should therefore be permitted to follow their own community laws to the extent that there is no disrespect for the *sharia* (system of Islamic law) or Islamic religious authorities such as the caliph. Non-Muslims in Islamic states of Iberia paid a *Jizya* (special tax). The city of Córdoba was the jewel of Moorish Spain, having several impressive libraries and witnessing regular interaction among Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars. When Córdoba was re-conquered by Christians in the thirteenth century, the grand mosque was re-consecrated and re-modelled as the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption. The Córdoba mosque-cathedral contains architectural features and symbols found throughout north Africa and the Middle East as well as Christian symbols and motifs. Sicily and other Mediterranean islands as well were ruled for periods by Arabs and other Muslims, though the majority populations remained Christian and continued to practice their faith. When Norman (Scandinavian-French) adventurers conquered Sicily in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, just as they conquered England in 1066 CE, they tolerated Islam to a greater extent than was the case in other parts of Christian Europe.

⁴ The Northern Crusades or Baltic Crusades were religious wars undertaken by Catholic Christian military orders and kingdoms, primarily against the pagan Baltic, Finnic and West Slavic people around the southern and eastern shores of the Baltic Sea.

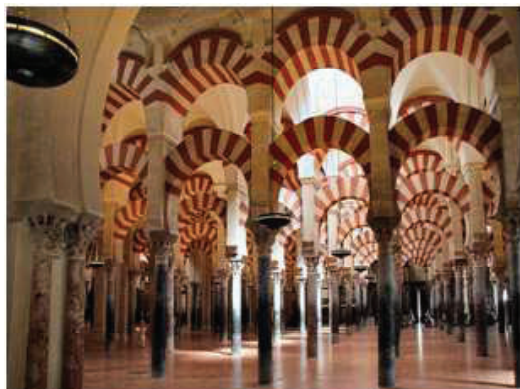


Figure 7.6: Mosque of Cordoba
Credit: James (Jim) Gordon
Source: Wikimedia Commons

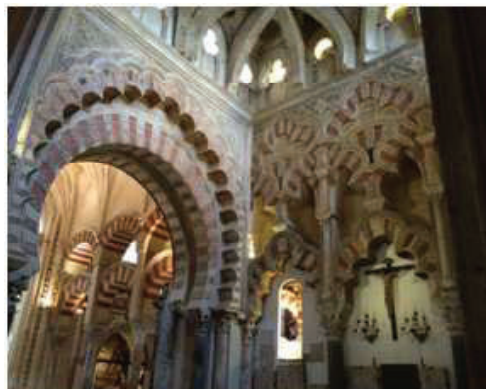


Figure 7.7: Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba
Credit: kerberosmansour
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Judaism was tolerated in some European states beyond Iberia with restrictions and monitoring by Christian authorities. According to Christian theology, Jews as a *gens* ('nation') were the murderers of Christ, and Christian teachings identified the complete conversion of the Jews as a major spiritual goal. Yet, with exception of the Italian lands, where Roman law was more deeply rooted than other parts of Europe, legal practices of medieval Europe did not clearly recognize collective or community rights of Jews to govern themselves within the officially Christian society. Instead, the Jews were usually recognized under law as special individual subjects of the king or queen, who could withdraw protection and favour. As already mentioned, Jews in Iberia had enjoyed toleration until the *Reconquista* (re-conquest of the Moorish states by Catholic princes). When the re-conquest was completed in 1492, Jews as well as Muslims had to convert to Christianity or suffer expulsion from the territory.

In spite of what could be called institutional anti-Semitism, Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Europe were not always bad, particularly in parts of Italy and the Netherlands. While Jews in Europe during this period were usually banned from positions of higher civil administration, and were not allowed to own land, their religious leaders entered into dialogues with authorities, including Christian clergy, about matters of religion, law and administration. While living in *ghettos* (walled colonies in towns separating Jews from Christians), Jews were yet not culturally or intellectually isolated from Christian society. Jews spoke languages that were mixtures of Hebrew and vernacular languages of Europe. *Ladino*, or Judaeo-Spanish, is one of these mixed languages that was used for centuries throughout most of the Mediterranean region. Many Jews, whether in Spain, Greece or German states, were multi-lingual. Learned Jews were proficient not only in Hebrew but in Latin and there were Jewish scholars of Roman law. Europe's Jews were well aware of Christian rituals and social norms, even if they were stigmatized by the majority community.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) How did the institution of Christian sainthood aid the transition from pagan to Christian Europe?

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- 2) Briefly describe the ways in which the medieval Church tried to ensure the population's obedience to Christian rules and values.

- 3) Give a brief account of the relations between Christians and non-Christians in parts of medieval Europe.

7.4 THE CLERGY, MORAL INSTRUCTION AND FORMAL EDUCATION

Before the 'Protestant Reformation' (For further details see **Unit 3; BHIC-108**)—upheavals against the Papal establishment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—all the people who belonged to the religious vocation (the clergy or clerics) were appointed indirectly by the Pope, and clerics were organized into official church organizations. In Orthodox Christian lands, religious functionaries were similarly part of a chain of command headed by the Patriarch in Constantinople. The Englishman John of Salisbury (?1115-1180), who could be called a political theorist, divided society into three 'orders' of men and women: those who *prayed*, those who *fought* and those who *worked*. The vast majority of the workers were cultivators of the land who made up 70 - 90% of the populations of different European territories during the Middle Ages. The nobility, whose role was to fight the king's battles and protect the rest of society, was numerically the smallest order of society, never constituting more than one percent of the population of most medieval European states. The first of the three **orders of society** mentioned by John of Salisbury, those who prayed, was of course the clergy. In some European states as many as ten to fifteen per cent of the population were clergy or served as lay members of church organizations (were recognized as assistants to the clergy). In royal councils and in other bodies where formal political deliberations or negotiations occurred, the interests of the kingdom were usually represented in terms of the three orders. The three orders of society collectively held different sets of privileges and liberties in relation to the ruler and to each other; this was about balance of interests, not about equality of rights, since the orders of society were imagined as complementary to rather than as equal to each other. At any rate, the clergy's responsibility for the 'care of souls' extended to care of bodies. While Christian theology emphasized that pain, suffering and poverty were the inescapable conditions of human life and were reminders of the human race's fall from grace (when Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden rebelled against the protective love that God showed them),

the Church also championed charity and compassion. Therefore, throughout medieval Europe the Church was the main corporate agency for delivery of social care services.

The clerical order or clergy was collectively charged above all with the spiritual salvation of the society's members. The priests and bishops taught and preached the Holy Scriptures to the population at large, whether peasants and artisans, merchants or dukes and kings, and they performed sacraments, masses and other rituals. Monks and nuns were the clergy who vowed to live under a particular *regula* ('rule', code of discipline), such as that of Saint Gregory, St. Francis, St. Dominic or St. Benedict. Though better fed, clothed and housed than many peasants and labourers, the monks and nuns were nevertheless pledged to asceticism and simplicity ('poverty, chastity and obedience'), so that they would devote their attention to God. Devotion to God meant spreading or preserving Christian teachings, so in addition to orders of friars who spread the Gospel (the Christian message) among the people, communities of monks and nuns kept libraries (or scriptoria) of cherished scripts. Monastic scribes made copies of manuscripts, some of them dating to Greco-Roman times, so that correct knowledge of the world and human society was preserved. The clergy was by definition Europe's literate class – the word 'clerk' is an alternate form of 'cleric' – during a period when literacy was uncommon even among members of the lesser nobility. The extent of the clergy's learning varied widely, from the minimally literate parish priests who could read the Bible and say prayers in Latin, to highly learned teachers and researchers who had thorough knowledge of Latin and Greek. Some clerics and church-educated scholars, such as Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas, also read Hebrew, Arabic or both.

Most institutions of formal learning in medieval Europe were run by the clergy, from simple parish schools (for children), to cathedral schools, to the universities of Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Valladolid and other places that emerged beginning in the late eleventh century CE. A university was initially a self-constituting association (*universitas*) of 'masters and scholars'. Many universities grew into corporations that received charters or licenses from the Papacy or civil rulers. Universities taught philosophy (at the core of which was the *trivium* of grammar, logic and rhetoric), mathematics, astronomy and music, as well as some natural science and also the professional subjects such as theology and law (and, in some places, medicine). Latin and to a certain extent Greek were the official media of instruction in these institutions; and for a long time most instructional texts were circulated only in Latin. To be without Latin – or, in Orthodox Christian lands, Greek – was to be uneducated. The highest university degrees, doctorates, were awarded in theology and law, but law included canon (or church) law as well as civil law. Even doctors of medicine were respectful of Church teachings about the human body and about the relationship of body to soul. Many approved texts studied in medieval universities were authored by the Church Fathers, men who helped codify Christian theology and church practice between the first and eighth centuries.

Church knowledge, as we have seen in an earlier chapter, was heavily influenced by thinkers and writers of Greco-Roman antiquity such as Aristotle and Plato. Among ancient Roman writers, Virgil and Cicero especially were studied and appreciated in the Middle Ages for their fine Latin style in writing. Few medieval scholars dared contradict or outright reject the claims and ideas of these approved ancient writers (whether Christian or pagan). The medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who was canonized (proclaimed) as a saint by the Catholic church, wrote commentaries on both Aristotle's and Plato's works and he drew heavily from their philosophical ideas in forming a Christian philosophical tradition called Scholasticism. Some philosophers of the immediate post-medieval era went so far as to argue that the reliance

of Aquinas and other medieval philosophers on Aristotle amounted to mental slavery. According to Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and some others associated with the 'Scientific Revolution' in Europe, medieval reverence for Classical thought had prevented Europeans from moving forward and innovating, particularly in science.

Almost all members of the cathedral schools and universities, including those who stayed on in the university to become masters (who tutored and lectured students), professors, deans and rectors, were either ordained (appointed) clerics or laymen who sought employment in the growing bureaucracies of Church and state. Princes and kings staffed their chanceries, archives and offices of state with clerics or with men trained by the clerics; clergy were essential to civil as well as ecclesiastical administration. Boys of different social classes (even the peasantry) entered the universities as young as fourteen or fifteen but typically at age eighteen or nineteen. Those who completed the degree *Magister Artium* (M.A.) had a license to teach others in any other university. In terms of recognition of educational credentials, medieval European universities were international and cosmopolitan. It was common for 'lovers of knowledge' to migrate from one university to another, even across territories.

A second point is that girls and women were largely excluded from European formal higher education. There are no records of female university scholars in Europe until the seventeenth century. The 'educated' women of medieval Europe were therefore usually members of the nobility who benefited from private tutoring and who were sometimes very accomplished, entering into oral or written debates with male scholars. Christine de Pizan (1364- c. 1430), daughter of an Italian astrologer to the King of France, was one such woman, as was Anna Komnene (1083-1153, daughter of Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos), renowned in her time as a physician and historian. Other learned European women were nuns and abbesses (heads of nunneries/monasteries for females). For example, the abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was proclaimed *magistra* by the nuns under her charge. She contributed to theology and medical science. Her *Ordo Virtutum*, a cycle of sixty-nine musical poems, is an important surviving example of medieval European music. Herrad of Landsberg (c. 1130-1195) too was an abbess and she authored an illustrated encyclopaedia (compendium of useful knowledge) titled *Hortus deliciarum* ('Garden of Earthly Delights'). Significantly, both Hildegard and Herrad were born into the nobility. Had they not become nuns, 'brides of Christ' instead of noble wives and mothers, it is doubtful that these women would have been allowed to be scholars and contribute to knowledge production.

7.5 CRITICISM OF CLERGY AND SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

This Unit has emphasized the social and cultural power of the Church in medieval Europe, but it is important to recognize that the authority of the Christian clergy was negotiated and *contested*. A society's culture is not a perfect mirror image of what dominant people and institutions want that culture to look like. Rather, the culture is like a cracked or distorting mirror of values of the dominant and the subordinate social groups alike. Criticism of the clergy by both elite and common Europeans was a visible part of medieval European culture. This can be seen in satirical stories (especially *The Decameron*) penned by the Italian Giovanni Boccaccio and the *Canterbury Tales* of Englishman Geoffrey Chaucer, in songs of university students and in poetry of wandering scholars and minstrels. An important cycle of songs and poems surviving from medieval times, the *Carmina Burana* (songs from Benediktbeuern, a German monastery), reveals the complex relationship between European clergy and laity and the tensions around

clerical values. Folklore and tales express medieval popular (peasant) beliefs about the greedy or lazy clergy.

The phenomenon of the *Goliard* poets (12th-14th centuries CE)

Goliards were students at cathedral schools and universities who expected (or were expected by their families) to become priests or to obtain even higher clerical office, but who often lacked motivation or lost respect for actual clergy. *Goliards* mocked the clergy and tried to be as un-holy as possible; their songs focused on eating, drinking and gambling.

Those who became clerical assistants and trainees performed pseudo-Christian ceremonies and conducted 'Feasts of Fools'. Rectors of the University of Paris in the thirteenth century were among the authorities who found *Goliard* behaviour threatening and subversive.

The scandalous behaviour of *Goliards* and the mocking sayings of peasant lore were mostly in fun and probably never posed a serious threat to the power of the Church.

Jan Hus, John Wycliffe and others cast doubt on the sacramental power of the priesthood and the authority of the Pope during the 14th and 15th centuries, and some of these critics organized rebellions against the Church, but for every proclaimed Hussite or Wycliffite there were thousands of Christians whose respect for the clergy and its roles was not undermined by their recognition of some 'bad' priests.

Historians continue to disagree about the relation of medieval anti-clericalism to the upheaval of the Protestant Reformation, beginning with Martin Luther's initial criticism (1517-1521) of 'abuses' by the Church establishment, that flared into civil war in several parts of Europe. Historians ask whether anti-clericalism actually increased during the late medieval centuries (c. 1300-1600) and whether protests against clergy reveal structural changes within the 'society of orders' related to the emergence of new kinds of 'people with money' in the towns, the *bourgeoisie*.

Clearly, 'intellectual' activity in medieval Europe was not actually a monopoly of the Church. The cultural phenomenon known as the Renaissance (Italian: *Renascimento*, 'rebirth') between 1300 and 1600 has been interpreted by many historians as a movement of mental liberation from Church teachings and values. There was supposedly a new human-centred outlook, although many Renaissance humanists took pains to show their piety and respect for the Church. Some humanists were Churchmen themselves, or they were patronized by the Church. One book from the Renaissance period, Giovanni Villani's *Florentine Chronicle* (written in the fourteenth century), indicates that in Florence (Italy) in the 1330's, as many as 35-40 % of male children were being educated in primary schools and that much of this schooling was outside the direct administration of the clergy. The students were mostly boys and young men who went to work in the accounting sections of companies and banks, who wrote or made copies of business letters and who did the 'clerical' work in municipal government as well as in the Church administration.

Another notable change in European society and culture in the later medieval centuries was connected to laicization, meaning the process by which functions performed by religious authorities are transferred to non-religious (lay) persons. From the very first centuries of Christianity, the Church allowed lay people certain roles (such as property management) in its own administration and upkeep; it encouraged the faith of lay Christians by engaging them in activities that the Church guided. The Church increasingly shared some social welfare functions with laity in the later medieval centuries. Köln

(Cologne) in Germany, with about 30,000 inhabitants in the year 1500, was a religious centre, having 19 churches, 100 chapels, 22 monasteries and 12 religious hostels. Three to four thousand people in Köln at this time were clerics, but even 'religious' institutions such as hostels, hospitals and shrines were being run by associations ('brotherhoods' and 'sisterhoods') staffed by lay people. Some historians have argued that greater participation by laity in various social welfare institutions across Europe does not necessarily prove that social welfare was being secularized or taken over by non-Church elements. Rather, it is argued, laicization of institutions shows that a sense of Christian social responsibility (charity, care of the sick, etc.) was increasingly being seen as everyone's business in a Christian society. In the end, it is impossible to understand medieval European culture without examining the ways that Christianity formed the whole outlook of medieval people and how the people (whether clergy or laity) negotiated their relation to the Church.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Briefly describe functions of the Christian clergy in medieval society.

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- 2) In what ways were women excluded from and in what ways did they participate in the production of formal knowledge ('high learning') in medieval Europe?

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- 3) Describe examples of anti-clericalism in medieval Europe before the Protestant reformation.

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- 4) *Laicization* of medieval European Christianity meant some adjustment in relations between clergy and laity and the social roles played by them. Explain this changing relationship in the context of medieval Europe.

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7.6 SUMMARY

The institutional power of the Church at the end of Roman antiquity spread throughout European lands with the process of Christianization, but this does not mean that the ‘civil power’ was in practice subordinate to ‘spiritual authority’. Neither did the Church simply impose Christian values on pagan societies. Worship styles and habits of pagan Europe were carried over into Christian practice, if not so much into Christian theology (the formal theory of the religion). Heresy trials and crusades were among the punitive measures taken by the Church to influence European social practice, while the observance of holidays and festivals, the maintenance of holy shrines, the institutions of ‘pastoral care’ and the formal education system were among the more constructive means of Christianization. The policy of a ‘society of one faith’ could not completely marginalize non-Christian elements in Europe, though the Spanish Catholic *Reconquista* illustrates how non-Christians who refused to convert could be expelled and almost eliminated. The Church along with monarchy was a pillar of the European ‘feudal’ order for several centuries after the Middle Ages. Christianity was omnipresent in the sphere of European culture, whether of the elite or of the common people.

7.7 KEYWORDS

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| Clergy/clerics/Church | : Clergy are people formally accepted by a religious organization or sect for religious duties. In Roman Catholicism and some other Christian sects, the clergy or clerics are ordained; those selected as priests go through a ritual of ordination by higher clergy (for instance, a bishop or metropolitan) and are then authorized to perform sacraments (rituals). Church (with capital ‘C’) refers not to a religious building but rather to a whole institutional form or set up of Christianity – its personnel, laws, rules, administration, theology, property, etc. |
| Chivalry | : deriving from a medieval French word for mounted warrior and referring to the status, obligation or fee owed by a knight, and by extension to the conduct expected of such a person by those connected to him. Knightly virtues of honour, obedience, reverence and love were the key values of chivalry. |
| Christianization | : refers to how people adopt Christian teachings and the officially sanctioned forms of worship and also means the larger processes by which the religion impacts social practices and cultural forms. |
| Feudal/feudalism | : ‘feudal’ derives from the medieval Latin word |

Goliard

Laity

**Orders of society/
society of orders**

feodum, meaning simply an estate in land, and feudalism refers to a common customary form of property and land control in Europe. The three key elements of the feudal system were the lord, the vassal, and the *fief* (a plot of land). A lord was a noble who held land; a vassal was a person who was granted possession of the land by the lord. In exchange for the use of the *fief* and the protection of the lord, the vassal would provide some sort of service to the lord, such as labour. The obligations and corresponding rights between lord and vassal in relation to the *fief* form the basis of the feudal relationship.

- : originally referring to a member of the clergy writing satirical Latin poetry during the 12th and 13th centuries; it later meant a wandering poet-singer, not necessarily a clergyman. The name *Goliard* may refer to the giant Goliath in the Bible, slain by the hero-king David, or it may be a corruption of the French word *gailliard* ('gay or jolly fellow'). In a letter to Pope Innocent II, the French abbot Bernard of Clairvaux referred to the controversial Paris scholar Pierre Abelard, who had been condemned as a heretic, as Goliath. All of these references suggest that, to the Church, *Goliard* meant someone monstrous, undisciplined and heretical.
- : those who recognize the Church as worshippers and adherents but who are not members of the Church by vocation. They are not ordained and have no sacramental authority.
- : a model of social organization in which each member of society is identified with a group that composes the society, and the group ('order') is recognized in the law and/or the system of political representation. The 'order' (sometimes also called the 'estate') is generally identified by its social or occupational function. The three-part society of orders discussed by John of Salisbury can be found in the French political system until 1789. Until 1789 a political body called the *États généraux* ('States-General') contained delegates from the First, Second and Third Estates: Catholic clergy, nobility, commoners.

7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 7.2
- 2) See Section 7.2
- 3) See Section 7.3

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 7.4
- 2) See Section 7.4
- 3) See Section 7.5
- 4) See Section 7.5

7.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Blockmans, Wim and Peter Hoppenbrouwers, (2018) *Introduction to Medieval Europe, 300-1550*, 3rd edition (Abingdon and New York: Routledge).

Brown, Peter, (1996) *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Cipolla, Carlo, (1993) *Before the Industrial Revolution. European Society and Economy, 1000-1700*, 3rd edition (London: Routledge).

Lansing, Carol and Edward D. English, eds., (2013) *A Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Medieval World* (Chichester: Wiley and Sons).

Smith, Julia M. H., (2005) *Europe After Rome: A New Cultural History, 500-1000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

7.10 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

Episode 1: Holy Land | Crusades | BBC Documentary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOyswuA8wEs>

First Crusade Part 1 of 2 | Epic History TV

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydVFqpbllwA>