

## **Religious Life c.1500.**

Medieval Latin Christianity was an insecure religion, surrounded by enemies, threatened by demonic forces, anxious about an end always imminent.

The Catholic Church aimed at doctrinal purity. The Medieval Church looked solid. At the head of the Church, the Pope (cardinals>bishops>priests).

Religion differed from region to region and even within regions.

The 15<sup>th</sup> century saw the papal power to recover strength from the Great Schism (1378-1417) (challenged the papal ideological foundations) and Conciliarism (the Pope is not a monarch, but subject to the Council).

In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century it was also the time to apocalyptic expectations. The idea that the Antichrist was to confront Satan, fears grew about witchcraft.

### Papacy and National Churches

The Papacy looked like a localised principality in Rome.

The Church decentralised itself allowing cardinals to exercise their power on their own local churches and become more powerful.

National churches emerged and rulers gained more control.

The power of Rome on the localities was limited.

The role of the papacy within the Church became more uncertain. It was deemed corrupted and exploitative, but few challenged its existence!

### Laity and Theology

The laity participated in parochial administration and funding. Attended Mass and read the *Book of Hours*, (private devotion).

At the local level religion was vitality.

Belief and practice: although there were core elements of the faith in the creeds (Sacraments, Ten Commandments), people were exhorted to avoid the deadly sins, (lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride) and attend to the seven works of mercy.

The religion was extremely flexible and variable. Even theology was regional. It was cumulative, the past never fully rejected and there were gradations in spirituality.

The cumulative nature, regional, made possible to speak of *Catholicisms* rather than Catholicism.

Proliferation of texts, stimulated debate among the learned but also local spiritualities.

Christianity was a guilt culture: Purgatory offered release from guilt after sufferings and remitting the sins, admission to Heaven.

There was variety within the Medieval Church. Religion was regional and personal. Religion could vary according to the availability of preaching.

### Late Medieval Dissent

Dissent was localised, diverse and uncoordinated.

The oldest heretical movement was called Waldensian, a movement of self-abnegation, voluntary poverty and vernacular preaching led by Valdesius of Lyon in the 1170s.

In England, the Lollard movement, an intellectual protest led by John Wycliffe (1320-1384). It supported a morally earnest Gospel, produced vernacular Scripture and sermons.

Hussites, the leader was Jan Hus (1370-1415). In large part of Bohemia it supplanted the priesthood and worship of the Catholic Church. They complained against corruption of the Church and sins of the clergy.

*Devotio Moderna*, a movement started in the Netherlands by the ascetic Geert Grote (1340-1384). He fought the decadence of the church and its many vices.

Threat of Humanist thinkers.

### Was it a case of too much (diverse) piety rather than too little?

The intensity of piety increased in these decades. There was growing commitment.

There was no decadence or apathy!

Lay religious life:

>Women: Widows, Beguines; Lived by the virtue of humility and discretion, took vows of perpetual chastity, poverty and obedience. No Nuns

>Men: Hermits, Humiliati, Anchorites; lived by a devotional regime. Meditated and prayed.

A heretic is someone that believes badly, not lives badly. At the end of the Middle Ages, dissenters appeared more devout, minimally interested in official cult, reserved, plain, modest and reading vernacular scriptures.

Reforms: transform the system, not smash it! There was not antipathy towards Catholicism.

Religion remained vital in 1500. Catholicism was still united under the Pope. It accommodated diversity without adversity.

The Reformation would be an internal transformation, not an external assault. (R. Swanson)