

History

Enquiry: What can we learn about the medieval world from the Book of Margery Kempe?

Medieval Religion

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The role of medieval religion

The role Christianity plays in English life has changed a lot since Margery Kempe was alive. Today, many people are not Christian and don't believe in God. When Margery was alive, the opposite was the case: almost everyone was Christian and believed in God. To medieval people, the idea that the world could be understood without the existence of God simply wouldn't have made sense!



Today most people do not go to Church regularly. Many people only go for weddings, funerals and at Christmas. When Margery was alive, the centre of most people's lives was the local church. It was the place where the whole community met to celebrate. The only time most peasants could relax was on Sunday, known as the Lord's Day, as well as 20 Holy Days when big religious events took place in the village. One of the most famous events was the Corpus Christi procession held during the summer months. The whole community followed a cross held by the priest as he walked around the village to celebrate **the Blessed Sacrament**. There was also feasting, music and the villagers put on plays based on stories from the Bible.



Different churches

Medieval churches, many of which still stand around the country, looked very different as well. Most people couldn't read so how things looked mattered a lot more. Rather than bare stone, the walls were covered with paintings of scenes from the Bible. There were also scarier paintings called Doom paintings of what would happen to **sinners** when they got to Hell. The churches were full of candles, which were kept alight by the villagers all year round. The churches would have all contained a huge cross at the front of the Church to represent **Jesus' crucifixion** by the **altar**. There would also be lots of smaller images and statues of **saints** which people would pray to when they were in difficult times.



Visions of Jesus

While all medieval villagers went to church on Sundays, lit candles and took part in the religious events, some people felt more strongly about God. After she had given birth to her first child (she had 14 in total!) Margery believed she was being attacked by demons until Jesus appeared to her at the foot of her bed and asked her, “Why have you given up on me when I haven’t given up on you?” For the rest of her life, she regularly spoke to Jesus — and cried about it constantly!



Holy journeys

Some people went on **pilgrimage** which was a journey to a holy place. The holiest place to visit was Jerusalem where Jesus lived and died. There were also other holy sites like churches with shrines to a particular saint. People in the Middle Ages hoped that by visiting these holy places, they would be cured of sickness and forgiven for sins they may have committed. Margery went abroad on three pilgrimages during her lifetime. She even went on one as an old woman and travelled thousands of miles on foot without her husband!



Glossary

A sin: something a person does that breaks God's law

The Blessed Sacrament: the piece of bread that some Christians believe is actually the body of Jesus

Jesus' crucifixion: when Jesus died on the cross

An altar: a table at the front of a church where the priest leads the service

A saint: a person who lived a very holy life who some Christians believe hears your prayers

A pilgrimage: a holy journey to a place or shrine



Comprehension Questions

1. What religion did people follow in medieval England?
2. What happened at a Corpus Christi procession?
3. What were medieval churches like?
4. Why did people go on pilgrimage?
5. Why did religion matter so much to medieval people?

