

## HOW RELIGIOUS WERE PEOPLE IN THE MIDDLE AGES?

Today, there are many different religions in England. Many people consider themselves Christians but only around three people in every hundred go to church on a Sunday. Things were very different in medieval England and religion was much more important in people's lives. Over the next few pages, you will learn about the role of the Church, how and why people worked for God and why people became pilgrims.

### 1: Religion and the Church

#### MISSION OBJECTIVES

- To understand how and why religion affected everyday life in medieval England.
- To understand how powerful the Church was and how it used its power.

In England during the Middle Ages, nearly everyone believed in God. They followed the Roman Catholic religion led by the **Pope** in Rome. It was the only religion in England at this time. People also believed that heaven and hell were very real places – as real as France or Spain to us. And whether you ended up in heaven or hell depended on how you lived your life whilst on Earth. So what did this mean for the ordinary medieval villager? What could they do to get into heaven and avoid hell? And how else did the Church feature in their lives?

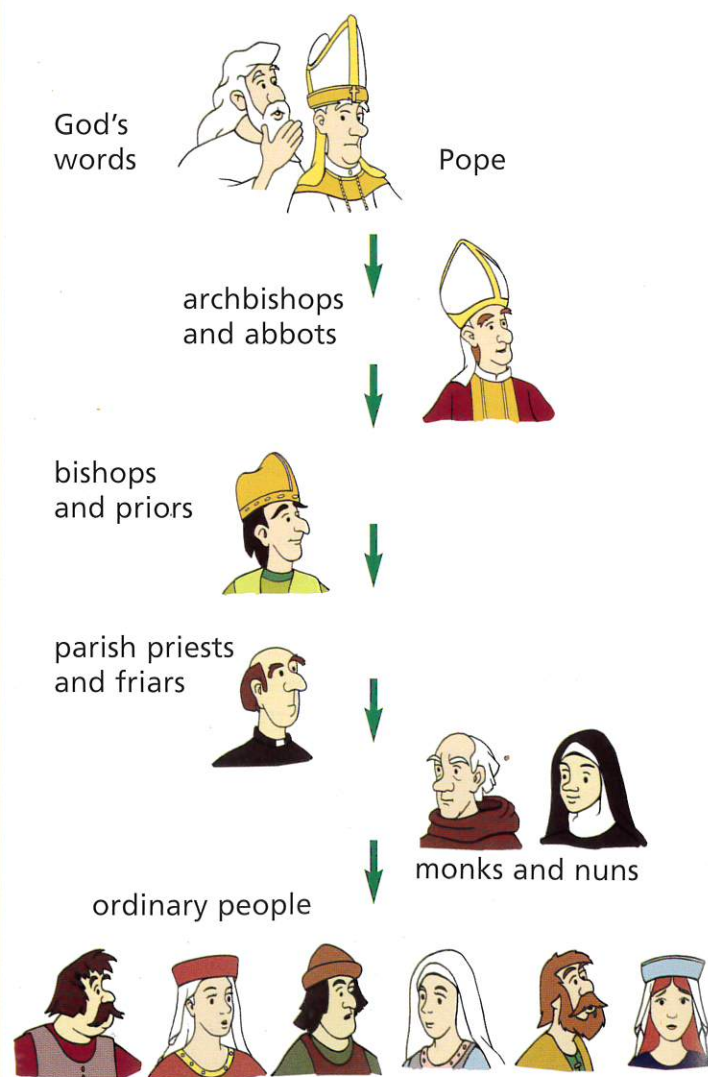
#### Hell to pay

People used religion to explain things. If they fell and broke their arm or caught a nasty infection, it was a punishment from God. If a baby died, it was because God wanted it. For most ordinary people, life was terribly hard and heaven seemed a warm, comforting reward for all their suffering on Earth.

If people were bad, however, there would be no reward in the **afterlife** – quite the opposite in fact! As well as being told about hell by the priest, there were pictures, statues and stained glass windows to remind people what hell was like. Huge **doom paintings** showed angels welcoming people into heaven and devils pulling wicked people into hell and torturing them in all sorts of horrific ways.

Church services were held in Latin, which ordinary people couldn't understand! There was a very good chance that the priest wouldn't understand what he was saying either – he would just learn the services by heart! You couldn't read the Bible unless you could read Latin – the Pope banned it from being translated into English.

#### How was the Church organised?

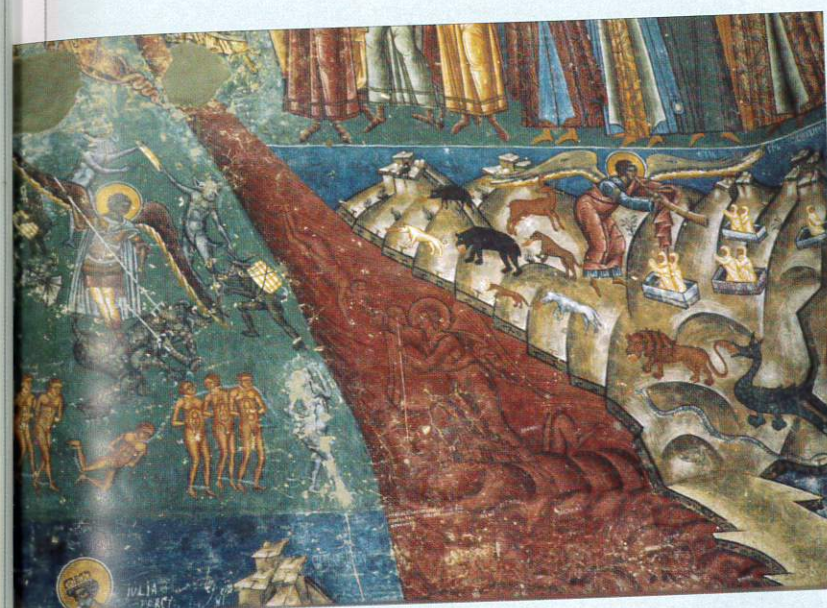


#### The heart of the village

The biggest building in a town or village would be the church. Unlike today, churches were very noisy, sometimes hectic places. As most people's homes were tiny, smelly huts full of smoke and animals, they didn't want to spend much time there! The church served as a meeting place for people, somewhere they could all sit comfortably and catch up on local gossip.

#### The price of religion

The church didn't come for free. The villagers had to give one tenth of all the food they grew to the parish priest. This was known as the **tithe**. As you can imagine, the villagers were often unhappy about this, especially when the harvest was bad. You also had to pay the church when you died! The priest was entitled to receive the second best animal of anyone that died in the village. Worshipping God and trying to get into heaven was an expensive business.



**SOURCE A:** This section of a doom painting dates from the 16th century, and is on a church wall in Voronet, Romania.

'They say the priest was away for six weeks and made no arrangements for a substitute. He spends his time in taverns, and his tongue is loosened to the great scandal of everyone. He is living with a woman, Margaret, and he cannot read or write so cannot look after his parishioners' souls.'

**SOURCE B:** By the Bishop of Hereford in 1347. He took evidence from people as he visited the local villages.

## WISE-UP Words

afterlife  
doom paintings  
Pope tithe

### Work

1 a Copy and complete the following paragraph.

Everyone believed in \_\_\_\_\_ and went to \_\_\_\_\_ in the Middle Ages.

The local church was the \_\_\_\_\_ building, and would have been very \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

People tried to lead good lives because they wanted to go to \_\_\_\_\_. They were afraid of \_\_\_\_\_.

1 b Villagers had to give the church one tenth of their harvest as a tithe. What is this as a percentage?

2 Study Source A.

a Why was it important to have pictures and paintings on church walls in the Middle Ages? Clue: Think about the language used by the priest in his services.

b What was the purpose of a doom painting? How do you think these kinds of paintings might affect the way someone behaved after leaving church?

c Draw your own doom painting. Remember, it's got to tell people what will happen to them in heaven and hell, and must not include any words.

3 Describe who was in overall control of religion in Medieval England and how his message was passed on to ordinary people.

#### MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Can you tell someone what religion everyone followed in medieval England?
- Do you know what people thought would happen to them if they didn't do what the Church said?
- Can you give a reason why people used the church that had nothing to do with God or religion?