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Death Dying and the Macabre in the Late Middle Ages (HPHI6002)

Essay Question

How did ideas about death and dying change from the late medieval period going into the protestant reformation?

Introduction

In the late medieval period peoples' ideas about death and dying were heavily influenced by their faith, church, scriptures (Ars moriendi, Book of Hours, Divine Comedy etc) and paintings that depicted scenes of the afterlife, that were on show in many churches of the period (Flynn 2014). Dying was a part of everyday life, dying was accepted such as living was, it was inevitable (Thornton & Phillips 2009:95). The ideas of the time, about death, mainly came from the church itself. The church influenced a dualistic mindset, that when you died, you were faced with the choice of either heaven or hell. The journey of the soul after death was undecided before the twelfth century (Daniel 1997:11), so when people started to query the church about what happened to one's soul exactly after they had died, the church came up with the doctrine of purgatory. This was a place that you could go to be able to cleanse your sins before entering heaven, a place much like hell, but these flames could burn away your sins. The doctrine of purgatory, along with the doctrine of intercession, enabled the church to have a hold of you even after you had passed on (Binski, 1996:25). Prior to then, heaven and hell were out of the grasps of the churches hands. Purgatory was a place invented that was never mentioned in the bible. It shaped people's ideas about death and dying so much that it changed the church forever.

Originally the church recognised three different kinds of sin, these sins were, original sin, deadly sin and forgivable sin. The first two of these sins, original and deadly, both qualified for hell as a punishment. Original sin though could be absolved with baptism and deadly sin and forgivable sin could be dealt with by the sacrament of penance. If a person, was to fall foul of any one of the seven traditional deadly sins, they could expect to find themselves on left of Jesus with the damned at the last judgement (Rasmussen 2009:369). Only contrition then could save you from the eternal consequences of hell.



*Medieval image of Heaven and Hell,
Museum Catharijneconvent. Utrecht*

The dualistic view of heaven and hell, along with the problem of death and salvation, became more complicated with the introduction of purgatory in the twelfth century (Hadley 2001:56). The doctrine of purgatory was introduced at the Council of Lyons 1274 (Platt 1996:102), when people had questioned the church about what happened to your soul immediately after death, purgatory explained what happened to you when you had died (Daniel 1997:11). Purgatory was a place you would go to cleanse your soul, until it is seen fit that you had served your contrition and could enter heaven. The churches view was, that the body and soul were separate. At the last judgement it was thought you would receive your body back (Bynum 1998:12) but the significant thing about religion at the time is what happened to your soul

after death, your soul was everlasting (Daniel 1997:1). Purgatory was the start of the journey to heaven, souls there were certain of salvation (Daniel 1997:12).

Purgatory effectively moved the last judgement from the next life to this. It was no longer played out in the afterlife, it now usually happened in the bedroom (Aries 1981:107). Dying had now become an concentrated physical and emotional experience in the 14th and 15th century (Bynum 1998:592). The optimistic early Christian attitude towards death and dying with a calmer afterlife of the 12th and 13th century had been replaced with the turmoil of purgatory (Aries 1981:107). Purgatory also brought up another problem and that is if you were in purgatory, you were considered to be on a journey to heaven, so you were not completely dead yet (Aries 1981:107). This gave the opportunity to be able to intercede with the dead and offer them prayer to help them with their journey.

Praying for the dead had been the traditional medieval route, when trying to help souls on their journey through purgatory and it was common for people to ask for masses to be read in late medieval wills (Daniel 1997:33), with funerals often emphasising on the hope of eternal life. The rich could even leave money for prayers to be said or if they wished build chantry chapels (Hadley 2001:56), so they could benefit from everlasting prayer. It was considered a dreadful fate to be forgotten in the pains of purgatory (Daniel 1997:12). Other options for the living to be able to intercede with the dead and their travels through purgatory were 'indulgences'. Indulgences became very sought after by the wealthy in later Middle Ages and were believed to have the power to help relinquish the torment of souls in purgatory (Duffy 1992:288). Indulgences, could be acquired from travelling sellers known as 'pardoners' (Daniel 1981:23). Indulgences, were certificates that qualified for the relief for a certain period of time in purgatory, they were guaranteed by the *thesaurus ecclesiae* (Rasmussen 2009:371).

The doctrine of the intercession, the ability for saints to be able to break the boundaries between the living and the dead (Binski 1996:24), gave the living the chance to help the dead and the church at the same time. Indulgences were not just for the wealthy, people who could not afford to pay for indulgences could be earn them by doing good deeds for the church, or in some cases saying prayers for people as requested in wills (Daniel 1997:23). With people's belief in purgatory it gave the church the opportunity to capitalise on 'The doctrine of the intercession', this made it possible for the church to profit from what could be called a 'Points system for the afterlife' (Binski 1996:24). The doctrine of the intercession gave the opportunity for prayers to be said to help quicken your soul's journey through purgatory into heaven. Indulgences had much the same effect as a confession would, except they gave you the opportunity to skip the penance. Indulgences were not considered a remission of a sin, merely a remission of the penance that was still outstanding to God (Duffy 1992:288).

Where time in purgatory was unspecified and linked with the weight of your sin, just like the punishments were linked to your sins (Daniel 1997:11; Rasmussen 2009:369), if you were a good person who had lived a Christian life you may expect a shorter time than, maybe someone who had lead an un-Christian life. The ability to purchase indulgences gave people hope, that even if they may not have led the saintliest of lives, they may be able to

get away with less time in purgatory than what was expected. Normal grants of remission concerning purgatory, were 40 days, but sometimes could be extended to total satisfaction on rare occasions, such as the declaration of the Jubilee at Rome (Daniel 1981:23; Duffy 1992:288). This such thing was of course open to abuse and at the time, the church was considered a money-making machine that fed off the fear of death and the afterlife (Bynum 1998:592 Daniel 1997:2).

The great plague that reached Britain in the autumn of 1348 had a profound effect on the attitudes towards death and dying at the time. The plague spared no one in its wake whatever their noble/holy rank. The mortality rate among clergy was relatively high, with many succumbing whilst tending to the afflicted and this must have influenced the parishioner's faith in many ways. They recognised that not even the clergy were safe and this left them with no pastoral care (Hadley 2001:87). The clergy had been affected more than most whilst tending the sick (Platt 1996:97). This left the church in turmoil with, clergy being recruited and rules of religious ordination abandoned, priests could be promoted highly in days, with little experience (Daniel 1997) and this caused the reputation of the church to fall further.

After the great plague had passed, albeit with many more sporadic outbreaks over the next century or so (Platt 1996), it had left a country decimated by the disease. The mortality rate varied between communities with some, such as Jarrow in the North East having a mortality rate at 78% (Platt 1996:9). This must have had great effect on the attitudes towards death at the time. Where people had died, unable to be given last rites or able to confess their sins, which was the normal tradition of the time (Binski 1996:32), what was to happen to their souls in purgatory? The medieval people turned to the church to ask for help and the church used the opportunity to preach sermons to the remaining telling them that it was because of sins they had committed (Daniel 1997), they also used it to capitalise on the selling of indulgences.



'The purgatorial Ladder', or 'Ladder of Souls with the Seven Deadly Sins'. Chaldon, Surrey c.1200

Works such as Vision of Tondal, 1149 and Dante Alighieri's 14th century poem, the Divine Comedy, had illustrated what the afterlife consisted of. Such images, as the own shown, were common place in medieval churches across the country. Both took the readers on spiritual journeys through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven

showing what the afterlife was like. Dante shows his version with sinners being punished in accordance with the sins they had committed in this world (Casey 2009:148). People were reminded of this afterlife every time they went to church, images of what was in store were emblazoned around the church (Flynn 2014:709).



The Last Judgement, Hans Memling c.1410

The last judgement had to be made at the time of death to allocate the equivalent punishments in purgatory (Broce & Wunderli 1989:263). This effectively made the last moments of a person's life crucial to their fate, with the crucial choice of heaven or hell being contested to the last moment (Le Goff 1984). Such things as mental attitude at time of death were crucial to your destination, and

swearing and complaining at time of death could lead to the devil taking your soul (Daniel 1997:40), with the most important concern being that eventually the soul will arrive with god in heaven (Daniel 1997:10). Pamphlets such as the *Ars moriendi*, (The Art of Dying), were created to help people at this stage of their death.

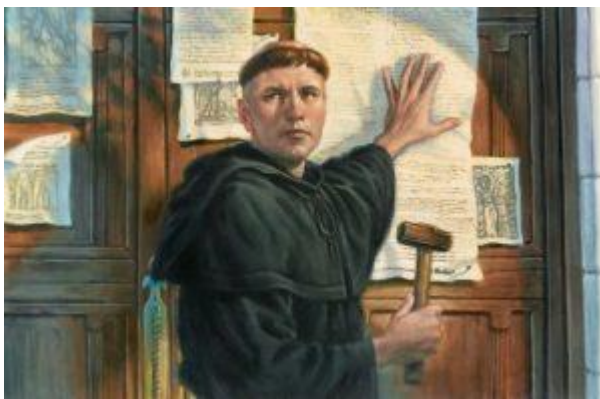
The *Ars Moriendi* commissioned by the Council of Constance in 1414 (Thornton & Phillips 2009:95), was first published in 1415, then again in 1450. This had a major influence on how medieval people treated death. The '*Ars moriendi*' or 'The Art of Dying' was an instructional manual which showed the laity and clergy how to perform a good death, it shows depictions on medieval thoughts of good and bad deaths (Thornton & Phillips 2009:94) There were two versions of the book, one with text (*Tractatus artis bene Moriendi*) and another which was made up just with images for the illiterate (*Ars moriendi*), this made it very popular amongst the population. The most accessible one, the *Ars moriendi*, was made up of thirteen woodcut drawings which showed the reader varying deathbed scenes. The need for a good death was crucial in enabling your soul to pass on into purgatory, which itself was the start



Image from. The 'Ars moriendi' or 'The Art of Dying'

of the journey to God and heaven. The woodcuts within the book showed scenes of what was to come on your deathbed and help to prepare for the battle for your soul. It showed you that you should not complain at the point of death and blasphemy could help the devil take your soul at the last moment (Daniel 1997:40). They showed that death was a role that had to be played out to the last breath and the devil was there to try and snatch you to hell.

Tarlow, says that the most significant change in the history of British attitudes towards the dead in the last 1000 years was down to the 16th century Reformation (Tarlow 2011:19). The reformation came about in the early 16th century with a series of events. Arguably, the event that had the most impact was when, Martin Luther and other sincere Christians had become concerned about the bad effects indulgences were having on members of his own congregation (Luther 1957:1). One of the main perpetrators in this, was a Johann Tetzel who was selling indulgences on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther had become concerned that Tetzel was abusing his position along with the church and in turn it was making people lazy. Why should they serve the sacrament of penance, one of the main focuses of late medieval Christianity (Rasmussen 2009:367), when they can just buy indulgences?



Martin Luther nailing his theses to the church. By Greg Copeland.

Luther, so incensed by this wrote a response in the way of the Ninety-Five theses, which was traditionally said to be nailed on the door of the castle church, Wittenberg on October the 31st 1517 inviting debate (Ball 2017:32). Alternatively, he may just of wrote to the Archbishop of Mainz, Albert of Brandenburg inviting debate. The main philosophies of Luther's 'Theses' revolved around the power of the pope and the great wealth of the church (Luther 1957). He saw the church and people such as Tetzel

abusing the practise of selling indulgences. He saw the element of *satisfactio* wrong (Rasmussen 2009:373), he thought faith alone and good deeds should be enough to get you into heaven. Of course, this infuriated the church who did not want to miss out on selling indulgences, after all the sale of indulgences was very important to the wealth of the church, indeed it had helped them become the largest landholder in Britain. The church unsuccessfully tried to silence Luther but with the introduction of the printing press and Luther commitment failed.

The printing press meant that Luther could get his message out there to the masses, the mood of the people of the time must have been looking for change. Plagues had kept breaking out (Platt:1996), and the people knew the church had no immunity to the plague, God offered no salvation here. The church was powerless and feeding off people's misery. Why should they keep paying the church when they offered no help for what they really needed?

The protestant view about death and dying went back to the dualistic view of heaven and hell after the reformation, reformers rejected purgatory (Rasmussen 2009:366). Reformers believed that you either went to heaven or hell and by doing good works along your life, you could be assured of going to heaven. There was no need for the church to offer prayers as they were not needed, you would already be at your destination. You were no longer on a journey, you should already be there. This in turn would free you up to be able to do more good in your life therefore helping you reach heaven.

Conclusion

This essay has shown how the ideas about death and dying changed going into the reformation. Where purgatory gave the afterlife a tripartite definition as opposed to the dualistic explanation beforehand, it also gave the church a way of exploiting a place that was created by themselves. The reformation effectively ended purgatory and the grip the church had over death and dying. Religious imagery was whitewashed from the churches in most instances although few survived. Where death and the dying had taken up so much of the medieval life beforehand, the Reformation had seemed to release the people from this. Without the fear that the catholic church had installed on the medieval population and the constant reminder of the afterlife people could now worry about the current life.

The bible was one of the churches most powerful assets, fact that it was written in Latin allowed them to keep it out of reaches of the common person. Although first translated into English by John Wycliffe in 1381, it was then again translated by William Tyndale in the 1520s. Tyndale's translation of the bible along with the invention of the printing press, meant the bible become widely accessible. No longer did the people need to listen to what the church preached, they could find out the sayings of the bible for themselves. No longer would they have to go around trying to catch masses and glimpses of transubstantiation (Daniel 1997:6) now they could stay home and study the bible for themselves.

Where the church had controlled the fate of your soul and defined what the afterlife was like, now your fate could be in your own hands. If you had led a good life then chances are you would go to heaven, it was not possible to lead a life full of sin and then buy your way out of the punishment anymore. The reformation gave the opportunity for you to be more Christian, engage in charity and good work to ensure your salvation. It took away the fear of what may happen and left the ball in your court, not in the hands of the church.

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Images

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