



Teaching Medieval History: The Age of Light with Dr. Junius Johnson

Lecture 3:
Understanding the
Medieval Mind

Outline:

“People didn’t long to be free of rules, but to be set free by rules; they didn’t want to cast off authority, but to be cast upon authority as that which would establish their lives. Anarchy, “to be without a head,” was no desirable state for a people. That way lay unmaking, a return to the primal chaos before God ordered the world.”

Attitudes Towards the Church

- Popular literature tends to ridicule the Church.
- Examples include the Canterbury pilgrims and unfavorable personages such as the monk, the friar, and the pardoner.

*A monk there was, one of the finest sort,
An outrider; hunting was his sport;
A manly man, to be an abbot able.
Very many excellent horses had he in stable:
And when he rode men might his bridle hear
Jingling in the whistling wind as clear,
Also, and as loud as does the chapel bell
Where this monk was governour of the cell.*

*The rule of Maurus or Saint Benedict,
By reason it was somewhat old and strict,
This same monk let such old things slowly pace
And followed new-world manners in their place.
He gave for that text not a plucked hen
Which holds that hunters are not holy men;
Nor that a monk, when he is cloisterless,
Is like unto a fish that's waterless;
That is to say, a monk out of his cloister.*



*But this same text he held not worth an oyster;
And I said his opinion was good.*

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* - The Monk

*A limiter, a very festive man.
In all the Four Orders is no one that can
Equal his gossip and well-spoken speech.
He had made quite many marriages
Of young women, and this at his own cost.
For his order he was a noble post.
Highly liked by all and intimate was he
With franklins everywhere in his country,
And with the worthy women living in the city:
For his power of confession met no equality
That's what he said, in the confession to a curate,
For his order he was a licentiate.*

*He heard confession gently, it was said,
Gently absolved too, leaving no dread.
He was an easy man in penance-giving
He knew how to gain a fair living;
For to a begging friar, money given
Is sign that any man has been well shriven.
For if one gave, he dared to boast bluntly,
He took the man's repentance not lightly.
For many a man there is so hard of heart
He cannot weep however pains may smart.
Therefore, instead of weeping and of prayers,
Men should give silver to the poor friars.*

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* - The Friar

*With him there rode a noble PARDONER
Of Rouncival, his friend and his compeer;
Straight from the court of Rome had journeyed he.
Loudly he sang "Come hither, love, to me,"
The summoner added a strong bass to his song;
No horn ever sounded half so strong.
This pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
But smooth it hung as does a strike of flax;
In driplets hung his locks behind his head,
Down to his shoulders which they overspread;*



*But thin they dropped, these strings, all one by one.
He had no hood, it was for sport and fun,
Though it was packed in knapsack all the while.
It seemed to him he rode in latest style,
With unbound hair, except his cap, head all bare.
As shiny eyes he had as has a hare.
He had a fine Veronica sewed to his cap.*

*His knapsack lay before him in his lap,
Stuffed full with pardons brought from Rome all hot.
A voice he had that sounded like a goat. [...]
But in his craft, from Berwick unto Ware,
Was no such pardoner of equal grace.
For in his bag he had a pillow-case
Of which he said, it was Our True Lady's veil:
He said he had a piece of the very sail
That good Saint Peter had, on time he sailed
Upon the sea, till Jesus him had hailed.
He had a latten cross set full of stones,
And in a bottle had he some pig's bones.
But with these relics, when he found on ride
Some simple parson dwelling in the countryside,
In that one day gathered more money
Than the parson in two months, that easy.*

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* - The Pardoner

- General impression of students/scholars is that Medieval laymen distrusted or hated the Church.
- Teachers' attitudes influenced how they taught about the Church.
- Atheists and Protestants allowed their hostility to Catholicism to color their teachings.
- Even favorable or Catholic teachers might perpetuate negative views without questioning them.
- Beautiful passages extolling the Church and her workers are often ignored, like this:

*A good man was there of religion,
He was a poor COUNTRY PARSON,
But rich he was in holy thought and work.
He was a learned man also, a clerk,
Who Christ's own gospel truly sought to preach;*



*Devoutly his parishioners would he teach.
Gracious he was and wondrously diligent,
Patient in adversity and well content,
Many times thus proven had he
He excommunicated not to force a fee,
But rather would he give, there is no doubt,
Unto his poor parishioners about,
Some of his income, even of his property.
He could in little find sufficiency.
Wide was his parish, houses far asunder,
But never did he fail, for rain or thunder,*

*In sickness, or in sin, or any state,
To visit the farthest, regardless their financial state,
Going by foot, and in his hand, a stave.
This fine example to his flock he gave,
That first he wrought and afterwards he taught;
Out of the gospel then that text he caught,
And this metaphor he added thereunto -
That, if gold would rust, what shall iron do?
For if the priest be foul, in whom we trust,
No wonder that a layman thinks of lust?
And shame it is, if priest take thought for keep,
A shitty shepherd, looking after clean sheep.
A truly good example a priest should give,
Is his own chastity, how his flock should live.*

*He never let his benefice for hire,
And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire,
And ran to London, up to old Saint Paul's
To get himself a chantry there for souls,
Nor in some fraternity did he withhold;
But dwelt at home and kept so well the fold
That never wolf could make his plans miscarry;
He was a shepherd and not mercenary.
And holy though he was, and virtuous,
To sinners he was not impiteous,
Nor haughty in his speech, nor too divine,
But in all teaching courteous and benign.
To lead folk into Heaven by means of gentleness
By good example was his business.*



*But if some sinful one proved obstinate,
Whoever, of high or low financial state,
He put to sharp rebuke, to say the least.
I think there never was a better priest.
He had no thirst for pomp or ceremony,
Nor spiced his conscience and morality,
But Christ's own law, and His apostles' twelve
He taught, but first he followed it himself.*

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* - The Parson

- In reality, the Church was *not* generally hated or mistrusted.
- Medieval minds could separate the system from its abuse, condemning bad clergy without distancing from the institution.
- Example: Dante praises and criticizes the Church simultaneously.
- Impossible to know the percentage of genuine piety, but there is no reason to assume most was not genuine.
- The Church was, in fact, held dear as demonstrated by the example of a king donating land to build an abbey.
 - Historians argue motives were to curry favor with the Church, but the king could genuinely mean what he said.
 - Doubting motives is often based on external assumptions.

Towards Government

- Average person did not appear to resent secular authority; evidence suggests otherwise:
 - Safety: Strong lords offered protection from attacks.

*The king was betrayed
ambushed in Jutland, overpowered
and done away with. The waves of his grief
had beaten him down, made him a burden,
a source of anxiety to his own nobles:
that expedition was often condemned
in those earlier times by experienced men,
men who relied on his lordship for redress,
who presumed that the part of a prince was to thrive
on his father's throne and defend the nation.*

Beowulf, Lines 901-910



*So this bad blood between us and the Swedes,
the vicious feud, I am convinced,
is bound to revive; they will cross our borders
and attack in force when they find out
that Beowulf is dead. In days gone by
when our warriors fell and we were undefended
he kept our coffers and our kingdom safe.
He worked for his people, but as well as that
he behaved like a hero.*

Beowulf, Lines 2999-3006

- Economic Stability: Lords provided economic stability and justice.
 - Well-run fiefdoms were prosperous.
- Hierarchy: People believed hierarchy was the natural state.
 - Desired freedom through rules, not from rules.
 - Anarchy was undesirable, associated with chaos before God's order.
 - Hated specific lords but not the institution of lordship.
 - Prayed for bad lords to die rather than overthrowing the government.

Family

- This discussion covers over 100 states with shifting boundaries and societal changes over 1000 years.
- Factors such as marriage age, [consanguinity rules](#), household size, and godparent numbers varied with time and place.
 - In 1215, the Church reduced the degrees of consanguinity from 7 to 4.
- Household size and composition is almost impossible to assess due to census methods, however the following assumptions may apply:
 - Urban households were mostly nuclear.
 - Richer families had larger households.
 - Countryside households were multigenerational.
 - Horizontal families, with siblings and their families living together, existed.
- Arranged marriages were common among the nobility for succession and continuity of governance.
 - Marriages were not just for personal or familial power but for the common good.



- Peasants married for love or convenience.
 - Secular studies sometimes misinterpret marriage purposes, reducing them to economic contracts.
 - As Christians, they really believed that marriage was a remedy against original sin and the proper place for sex.
- Peasants routinely married, whether for love or convenience.
 - Marriage also satisfied requirements of legitimacy of issue for serfdom benefits.
- The family was a centrally important institution with love between parents and children the norm.
 - Family honor and legacy were important.
 - Patronymics and last names reflect family deeds and legacy.
 - Spiritual kinship preached by the Church was important, evidenced by consanguinity tables for godparents.

Sense of Humor

- Humor was considered necessary for mental relaxation.
- Scatological humor was common and would not have caused the same disgust as today.
- Jokes often involved authority figures being humiliated, aligning with religious beliefs.
- Examples from Poggio Bracciolini:
 - The Abbot of Septimo, a very fat and corpulent man, on his way to Florence one evening, inquired of a peasant he met, “Do you think I shall be able to enter the gate?” Of course, he thus meant to ask whether he was likely to reach the city before the closing of the gates. But the country-man, rallying his stoutness, replied, “To be sure, you will; a cartload of hay gets through, why should not you?”
 - The father of a friend of ours had an intimate relation with the wife of a downright fool, who, besides, had the advantage of stuttering. One night he went to her house, believing the husband to be away, knocked on the door, and claimed admittance, imitating the husband’s voice. The blockhead, who was at home, had no sooner heard him, than he called to his wife, “Giovanna, open the door, Giovanna, let him in; for it does seem to be me.”
 - A man who had given his wife a valuable dress, complained that he never exercised his marital rights without it costing him



more than a golden ducat each time. “It is your fault,” answered the wife, “why do you not, by frequent repetition, bring down the cost to one farthing?”

- A Florentine I was acquainted with was under the necessity of buying a horse in Rome, and bargained with the dealer, who asked him twenty-five gold ducats, too high a price; he offered to pay fifteen ducats cash, and to owe the rest; to which the dealer agreed. On the following day, when asked for the balance, the buyer refused, saying, “We must keep our agreement: it was settled between us that I was to be your debtor; I should be so no longer if I were to pay you.”

Forms of Entertainment

- Plays:
 - Morality plays were popular, which included virtuous lessons.
 - Farcical plays were held during the twelve days of Christmas, which poked fun at serious subjects.
- Song and Dance:
 - Traveling performers entertained towns.
 - Local music gatherings and festival dances were common.
- Games:
 - Card, dice, and guessing games were popular; chess and backgammon spread among the nobility.
 - Tournaments included jousting, archery, and melee fights.
 - Maypole
- Sports:
 - Colf (golf's predecessor), bowls (ie *bocce*), handball, and tennis.
 - Primitive football, horseshoes, skittles (bowling), stoolball (cricket).
- Poetry and Sermons:
 - Poetry recitations and sermons drew large crowds.
 - Itinerant preachers were popular.

In summary, medieval people were not dour but enjoyed fun and games as much as we do.