

The Two Medieval Churches and Their Impact on Art

by Simon Abrahams



Clerics using a computus to establish the date of Easter, early 14th century

Ever since I became aware, about seven years ago, that masterpieces of Western art tend to make more sense viewed through the ideas of esoteric Christianity than through the Secular Church's religious dogma, I have been curious why art historians write as though there was only one Church in the Middle Ages and Renaissance when – even before the Reformation – that one Church was really two. There may have been one Church dogma but there were plenty of other beliefs, some completely at variance with general understanding of Christianity. The latter would appeal to creative minds in any age even if the papacy then had not been totally discredited by corruption, simony and moral degradation.

There is, at the same time, great misunderstanding about what esoteric Christianity involves, partly because the New Age movement, Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* and other popular influences, many wildly inaccurate, have biased academic minds against the subject. Although some established art historians, such as David Packwood at *Art History Today*, do have open minds on the subject, most are still wary of facing scorn from their peers. Graduate students need to be especially careful. This must change so that art from the Middle Ages to Impressionism can be discussed freely without fear of general disdain. Specialists in the twentieth century do not face quite as much open hostility because the artists themselves - Mondrian, Pollock, Duchamp and Barnett Newman to name a few - were quite open about their interest in Theosophy, Alchemy, Gnosticism or Buddhism. Even Harold Bloom at Harvard, a leading literary critic, is a practising Gnostic. On the other hand Konrad Oberhuber, once an influential art historian and follower of the twentieth-century mystic Rudolf Steiner, made a dreadful error when he linked Poussin's *oeuvre* to some of Steiner's more outrageous ideas and subsequently withdrew from Poussin studies to avoid further humiliation. ⁱ

In contrast to the slow and hesitant steps of art historians, departments in Religious Studies, including new ones focussing on Mysticism, Esotericism or Alchemy, are advancing rapidly. For art historians to take advantage of these developments they will first have to be more precise about how the Church worked in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. It was not an army with one commanding general and some simple objectives, far from it. At the very least, there were two Churches. To understand how they worked, you should read Justin Clegg's short booklet for The British Library, *The Medieval Church in Manuscripts*, a document I mostly rely on for the subsequent account.ⁱⁱ

Religion dominated life in the Middle Ages in ways that we today find hard to understand. The Church dwarfed all other authorities, was not constrained by political borders and wielded power all across Europe. It was also one of the most organised institutions, from the Pope at its head down to its vast network of secular officials, enabling Church influence to be felt in the smallest village. The Church was also highly centralized with a single figure, the Pope, holding ultimate authority. By the late Middle Ages the Pope had become the last court of appeals on matters of faith and morals and his appointments and subsequent decisions were widely considered to be divinely inspired. Yet he was not free to act entirely as he wished because on important matters his decisions had to be acceptable to the wider community. Thus Church Councils were sometimes called to determine points of religious doctrine or when major changes to Church practice were needed. In reality the Councils were rare.

Once the papacy had become the most important administrative force within the Church, it controlled administrative positions down to the level of the parish, was Europe's largest landowner and claimed as its revenue a tithe (or tax) on agricultural production. When a new appointment was made, the papacy took the first year's income, appropriated revenue from vacant posts until they became filled and received payments from other sources as well. With the papacy at its head, the institutional body of the Church then split into two, the difference between them now crucial to our understanding of Christian art: the Secular Church and the Regular Church.

The Secular Church, which served the religious needs of the masses, was by far the most important of the two Churches and it is the beliefs and doctrines expounded by the Secular Church which today dominate art history. The Regular Church, on the other hand, cared for those who were often more spiritually advanced, men and women who had taken vows to live apart from the community, separated from society, as in monasteries, nunneries and even caves.



St. Margaret and the Dragon
from a Book of Hours,
Northern France, 15th century

The hierarchy of the Secular Church provided the basic administrative structure while the Regular Church cared for Christianity's most serious practitioners, men and women who had taken vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. They were heirs to a movement that was originally independent of the Church when certain people in the first two centuries withdrew from society to devote their lives to prayer. The movement, which eventually became known as "monasticism", was regarded by the early Middle Ages as particularly religious. Indeed as a result of their popularity the Papacy eventually absorbed them into the Church though they continued to run their own affairs and appoint their own leaders. Since the Regular Clergy could not automatically perform the functions of the Secular Clergy, they continued to remain two distinct groups.

Because individuals often inspired monastic movements, the Regular Church was complex and disjointed with a bewildering variety of orders. Nevertheless the Regular Church ultimately provided an alternative to the Secular Church for groups like religious women unable to acquire clerical status and mystics who felt a calling. The monasteries and nunneries of the Regular Church had also played a vital role during the Dark Ages, preserving the Greek and Arabic texts crucial not only to humanism but to esoteric Christianity as well. There was therefore a greater variety of religious expression within the Regular Church, some of which might have been deemed heresy by the other. Women, like St. Teresa, who had erotically inspired visions of unity with Christ or men who felt themselves at one with God were, on the face of it, heretics to the Secular Church. However given their popularity among the people-at-large and their support from within their own movements, the Secular Church often had to turn a blind eye to such esoteric beliefs, sometimes even incorporating them into the Church proper. Indeed the line between heresy and piety was always extremely thin, some heretics condemned for beliefs that were less extreme than those of others who had been raised to sainthood.

At the same time as the Secular Church descended into corruption, many saintly individuals were writing books of private devotion that had become increasingly popular with the arrival of the printing press. Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* became a best-seller and private prayer, alone at home, encouraged individuals to question the official interpretation of Scripture thus leading to a wider spectrum of religious thought. Many paintings intended for private devotions must have been based on these non-doctrinal ideas. Indeed, once printing began, the Church lost its control over the Scriptures entirely. Individuals could read it for themselves. Next week I will discuss some of the esoteric ideas common in the Regular Church that were unknown or rejected in the Secular Church. They help explain some of the well-known mysteries in art that Christian dogma of the Secular Church has been unable to solve.

Endnotes

ⁱ See David Packwood, “Raphael, Rudolf Steiner and Secret Art History” at http://artintheblood.typepad.com/art_history_today/2011/04/raphael-rudolf-steiner-and-secret-art-history.html

ⁱⁱ Justin Clegg, *The Medieval Church in Manuscripts* (London: The British Library) 2003