

Decline of monasticism in late medieval europe essay



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Institutional Christian monasticism dates back to the 3rd century when where it emerged as a way of living martyrdom in Egypt. This spread to the other parts of the world especially Europe where it was embraced by many Christians who sought to devote their lives to God. The medieval age saw tremendous growths of monasteries in Europe, many people were interested with the monastic life. Monasteries at this period had recruits from different sections of the society and they were supported by the poor and the rich in the society.

As the monasticism became established in the society there were different reactions from the society especially on the type of life that the monks led. Out of the movement there came other orders which challenged the way monasteries were run. The friars and hermits orders emerged with an aim of reviving the traditional monastic communities. These are people who devoted their life through living alone and using most of their time praying while living a simple and poor lives.

The lives that these orders lived represented a feeling that the monasteries were increasingly becoming wealth and the original spirit of poverty and simplicity had slowly disappeared. Hermits sought to living in absolute isolation so that they can have as little influence from the society as possible. They depended on the society for food and clothing as they were well known in their local areas. At times they were often accused of harboring criminals and vagabonds attracting hostility from the local people. On the other hand people trusted them as they were trusted to heal and dispense wise words to the people.

Monasticism continued to be popular in this period until it was challenged by Martin Luther, the man who brought revolution in the church. The protestant reformation marked the decline of monasticism in Europe as people reacted in different ways to the writing of Martin Luther concerning works and faith. Monasticism was no longer considered a special class of order which had sole rights to pray for the other Christians. In 1521 Luther condemned monastic life arguing that the life of a monk did not stand higher before God.

This condemnation was prompted by an argument that the vows offered by monks to God offered something that was equivalent to salvation. To Him the justification of faith was the only thing that can move a Christian close to God. He dismissed the claim that the calling of the monks and nuns had anything special in the eyes of God. Luther emphasized that any other person had been assigned duty which was a service to God and the monks were not holier than the rest of the people in the church. All Christians were equal unless their faith was unequal. He equated the estate of monasticism as any other office in the world.

Protestants reformation an event that marked the end of the medieval period saw many monasteries being closed in different parts of Europe. This brought to an end nine hundred years of monastic tradition that had spread in many parts of Europe including England. From this time monasticism no longer attracted or commanded the large support it had enjoyed from the society in the last nine hundred years. (Durston, C 2001 76) The reformation in the church exposed the corruption that had been the order of the day in the monasteries. People discovered that the monks were living in luxury at the expense of the other Christians.

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It is at this time that people started to change their focus on the religious groups more so the monks. This led to the fall in the number of the people being recruited to the monasteries and at the same time the donations that were channeled towards the survival of the monks and nuns reduced considerably as people could not continue to contribute towards their cause as they came to discover that most of them were living a affluent life whereas the original monasticism advocated for a simple and a poor life. This dealt a big blow to this movement as it could not continue carrying out its duties without the support from the other Christians.

Those who were already living in the monasteries began to withdraw either abandoning their religious faith altogether or continuing to practice it but this time secretly. (Burton, J 1994 113) The declaration by Martin Luther in 1521 that the monastic life had no basis in the scriptures and people were not bound by the vows they made to become monks made people change their attitude and stand on this life which was purported to be commissioned by God. This declaration led to many activities which saw the decline of monasticism in Germany and many other parts of Europe.

A meeting was held after this declaration by members of the Augustinian Friars of which Luther was a member, the group decided to dissolve the movement and allow the regular clergy to leave their offices and go back to their normal life where they were free to marry and start their own families. This prompted many of those who were had already devoted to live this kind of life to resign from their offices or leave the monks altogether to begin a new chapter in life where they would be free to marry and have families of their own as long as they as lived according to the teaching of the bible.
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This marked a period that saw the church influence in the society decline as people started to seek other solutions to the problems that they were experiencing in their lives. This development coupled with the enlightenment of the church by the revolution that was started by Martin Luther saw the major changes in the history of the church where the establishment was challenged for the first time. The exposure of the monasteries as places where people went to live in luxuries and the declaration by Luther on the legitimacy of the monastic life brought a feeling that swept across Europe.

These happenings spread quickly to the other parts of Europe especially in Europe where the dissolution of the monasteries was ordered. The rulers of these countries established laws which later came to order the closure and destruction of the monasteries. (Burton, J 1994 123) In England the suppression of the monasteries was an administrative and a legal process that was ordered by the King Henry the sixth. The disbandment of the monasteries in England, Wales and Ireland happened at the same time when the declaration of Luther was being made.

Though this move was largely a political one there was a connection with what was taking place in Germany and other parts of Europe. The king was given powers to carry out this activity by the constitution following the enactment of the law by the parliament in 1534. This law which was popularly known as the Act of Supremacy gave the king the absolute powers over the church. He was made the overall supreme head of the church in England. He was using the powers given to him in this capacity to take the property owned by the monasteries and later close them down.

The power struggle between the pope and the King of England led to all this as the king felt that he was powerful enough to attract attention from the pope. When the Pope declined to send annulments to the king the relations between the two powers became sour. The king took the great advantage of the people feeling towards the monastic life to make the laws which gave him powers equivalent to those of the people. He used the chance to fight his battles with the church. He succeeded in his quest to make the church subordinate through grabbing the opportunity that presented itself at this time of the church reformation.

In 1534 through the parliament he authorized Thomas Cromwell to make a visit to all the monasteries and purify them on his behalf and instruct them on their duties to obey the authority that was bestowed to him by the constitution. A report was also produced detailing all the assets belonging to these institutions, this was a preparation for a take over of all the belongings of the monasteries including the land where they rested. All those who were appointed to carry out the audit of these institutions were all opposed to the establishment of the monasteries therefore their report was greatly exaggerated.

The report was adopted and the institutions were dissolved on the pretext of their mismanagement and corruption. (Hale, J and Mallet, M 2000 87) The dissolution and destruction of the monasteries did not only happen in England other countries across Europe followed suit. King Henry introduced a law in Ireland which allowed to carry out the same thing that he had done in England. In Switzerland the monasteries came under threat in 1523 when

the government ordered the nuns to leave the convents to marry and start their own families.

What followed next was the closure and dissolution of the monasteries in the country. The government did this in the pretext of using the money gained to fund education and help the poor. Those religious group which cooperated with the government were offered assistance to start their secular lives, in some cases they were given pensions. The protestant reformation was the most important factor that led to the decline and later destruction of the monasticism in the late medieval Europe. The events that followed were directly as a result of this revolution that changed the history of the church in the world.

Luther played a great role in enlightening the people and exposing the evils that existed in the places where people thought holiness was the order of the day. The institution that was taken to be one of the powerful in the church came crumbling down as a result of the revelation and empowerment of the masses. It was equivalent to a revolution in the church. The declaration that the vows taken by those who were devoted to monastic life was the last nail. The institution which had been embraced in the whole continent continued to decline.