

Discuss the way
heresy was viewed in
the fifteenth century?



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Introduction

Heresy is a word that people misuse when a faith differs from alternative faiths. Heresy, the word, is derived from the Greek language and is translated as meaning a 'sect'. The word usually describes a small dissenting group who do not believe what the majority believe. The Catholic Church believed in baptism and any catholic who had been baptised and then went against the teachings of the Catholic Church were considered to be a heretic. Other faiths that did not practice baptism were not considered to be heretics.

It is the Catholic Church that decides on heresy. A person has to be accused before the Catholic Church can judge their case. These accused are taken to the church where they will be confronted with the Catholic Church hierarchy and depending on the seriousness of the charge the pope may become involved. The heretic may have been falsely accused because of jealousy, hatred, coyness or ambitiousness; in fact the accused could find they were being judged as a heretic for any reason and by friend or foe alike.

The philosopher, John Wyclif who was born in central England in 1324 taught moral philosophy at Oxford. He had a big following among the students. He was unhappy with the Catholic Church because at this time the Catholic Church was extremely rich, powerful and corrupt. He wanted the Catholic Church to be reformed with the King at the head, not the pope. He wanted the King to stop the Church tax going to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and more religion taught by faithful clerics which in turn would make for holier peoples of England. John Wyclif went into politics as he felt that here

he would get the power to make good his religious ideals. The Catholic Church was concerned about Wyclif's ideals and his growing powers. Wyclif's followers were becoming larger and they stopped listening to the Catholic Church and began listening to the teachings of John Wyclif. Wyclif wanted to see the end of corruption within the Catholic Churches. When in government Wyclif was protected by a powerful nobleman, John of Gaunt, who followed Wyclif's ideals. John of Gaunt was unfortunately dismissed from the government in 1376 and very soon after John Wyclif was also brought up on heresy charges and was soon exiled from Oxford.

“ Once his protector was gone, Wyclif found himself openly attacked by people who believed his teachings were dangerous. He was brought up on charges in 1378 and again in 1381. In 1382 he was forced out of Oxford, along with a number of his adherents. He retired to Lutterworth, suffered a couple of strokes, and died in 1384.”(1)

(1) Heresy in the late middle ages-Knox, www.boisestate.edu/courses/latemiddleages/heresy/01.shtml

John Wyclif wanted the corruption in the Catholic Church stopped. This was what he taught and believed. He was never to see this accomplished. After his death some followers took his ideals and started the Lollard movement. This movement was anti-Catholic Church as they believed that anyone was able to preach the word of God and be able to give communion not just a privileged Catholic clergy. The Lollards also believed that anyone can be saved without the intervention of a God-given clergy. These popular ideas were, according to the Catholic Church, heresy.

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“ What did they put in the place of the institutional church?

Like several other medieval heresies and the later Protestants, the Lollards had fundamentalist leanings. The Bible, especially the Gospel, gave humanity all knowledge necessary for salvation. They derived from their fundamentalism a hostility to what they called “ superstition” — the devotion of the majority felt towards the Mass, the Blessed Virgin Mary, saints and their relics, and pilgrimage. The most common devotional practice of the Lollards was learning large parts of the Bible by heart, and repeating and discussing them with among themselves.”(2)

The Lollards were not the only movement to come from John Wyclif’s ideals. Some of these movements were even more puritanical while other was more educationalists. They all read, preached and taught the New Testament of which they tried morally to live by.

“ Lollards were not a unified group or organization. We can identify several different groups:

Wyclif’s ideas inspired a surge of religious activity in several disparate groups.

The first group was made up of Oxford theologians who knew Wyclif personally and who had been convinced by his arguments, or by his zeal and sincerity. Several of these people became active preachers or propagandists of Wyclifism, at least for a few years. Some gave up during the serious repression of the 1380s

A number of influential knights present at the court of Richard II, who had

been exposed to Wyclif's ideas during political debates. After the deposition of Richard II the Lollard knights diminished in number and influence. But for a decade or so they had given heretical preachers protection and encouragement.

The third group was the large number of ordinary priests and laymen who were exposed to Wyclif's ideas through the efforts of the pioneers.”(3)

(2) The orb: on-line reference book of medieval studies, www.the-orb.net/textbooks/muhlberger/15c_religion.html

(3) The orb: on-line reference book of medieval studies, www.the-orb.net/textbooks/muhlberger/15c_religion.html

John Wyclif's believed that Christian people should have the Bible and be able to read it for themselves. Some of his older followers translated the bible into English so all English speaking Christian people were able to read it. Along with the bible, they also translated the Latin writings of John Wyclif himself.

The heresy persecutions in England were slow and disorganized unlike those persecuted on the continent. The writings of John Wycliff saved the Lollardy from prosecution. In 1382 Wyclif's ideals were attacked by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Oxford Church Council. It was not until 1401 when Henry 1V passed the De heretico comburendo statute which allowed for the burning of heretics, that the Lollardy movement lost many powerful and upper-class followers. This was a time when heretics both in England and on the continent were hounded, captured, tortured and the burned at the stake.

It became a time of fear especially for those out-with the Catholic Church. It <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-way-heresy-was-viewed-in-the-fifteenth-century/>

was Pope Gregory IX who ordered that convicted heretics were to be burned. This had been a normal occurrence on the continent since 1224 but only became prevalent in England in the 15th Century.

“ Gregory also mandated that heretics be sought out and tried before a church court. For this purpose, he first appointed special inquisitors (for example, Conrad of Marburg in Germany and Robert le Bougre in Burgundy) and later entrusted the task to members of the newly established Dominican and Franciscan Orders of friars. The independent authority of the inquisitors was a frequent cause of friction with the local clergy and bishops.”(4)

“ The Inquisition was a medieval church court instituted to seek out and prosecute heretics. The term is applied to the institution itself, which was episcopal or papal, regional or local; to the personnel of the tribunal; and to the judicial procedure followed by the court. Notoriously harsh in its procedures, the Inquisition was defended during the Middle Ages by appeal to biblical practices and to the church father Saint Augustine, who had interpreted Luke 14: 23 as endorsing the use of force against heretics.”(5)

When Pope Innocent VIII issued the papal Bull, *Summis desiderantes*, in 1484 against heresy and witchcraft, this was because of the evidences found by the Inquisition that witchcraft went along with heresy. Those who were prosecuted for witchcraft and heresy had to be made to confess their sins. This was done through torture. These confessions were the evidences that the crime of heresy and witchcraft went hand to hand and it was evident that it was spreading quickly through-out the Catholic world.

(4) The inquisition, [www. thenazareneway. com/inquisition. htm](http://www.thenazareneway.com/inquisition.htm)
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(5) The inquisition, [www. thenazareneway. com/inquisition. htm](http://www.thenazareneway.com/inquisition.htm)

“ At the beginning of the interrogation, which was recorded summarily in Latin by a clerk, suspects and witnesses had to swear under oath that they would reveal everything. Unwillingness to take the oath was interpreted as a sign of adherence to heresy. . . . In more severe cases the wearing of a yellow “ cross of infamy,” with its resulting social ostracism, or imprisonment could be imposed. Denial of the charges without counterproof, obstinate refusal to confess, and persistence in the heresy resulted in the most severe punishments: life imprisonment or execution accompanied by total confiscation of property.

Since the church was not permitted to shed blood, the sentenced heretic was surrendered to the secular authorities for execution, usually by burning at the stake.”(6)

During this time the papal Inquisition saw the rise in executions of witches while the crime of heresy had become much less. Witches and sorcerers had become the new heretics. Whereas a heretic had to be accused and brought before the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to be judged by a God-given cleric, this was true also of a witch or a sorcerer. If an accused was found guilty of being a witch or sorcerer then instead of being exiled or excommunicated they were burned or executed in another way. This was a time of fear and suspicion within most societies both in England and on the continent.

“ The number of witches and sorcerers burned after the late 15th century appears to have been far greater than that of heretics.”(7)

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In fifteenth century Spain the Catholic Church was extremely powerful but this power was also held by those of the Jewish faith. The crime of heresy was few and far between so when the Spanish Inquisition was organized by the Catholic Church it was for a different purpose of that of the papal Inquisition. The Catholic Church wanted to replace the Jewish influences at the royal court and within the ruling classes of Spain. The people of Spain were extremely religious and were greatly influenced by the God-given right of the Catholic Clergy who they believed were chosen by God to do His bidding. The Spanish Inquisition went on, not only to persecute Jewish people but they hunted down any person who went against the Catholic Religion and teachings. The Spanish Inquisition brought about the hatred of all things Jewish.

“ The Spanish Inquisition was created to deal with convert Jews. During the middle ages the Jews had secured a prominent place in the political and economic life of Spain, and had established themselves in many professions, even as royal counsellors. Their success and prosperity aroused resentment in many people and from the fourteenth century onwards there was a dangerous and irrational hatred of them which erupted at times into violence, like the massacres of 1391.”(8)

(6) The inquisition, [www. thenazareneway. com/inquisition. htm](http://www.thenazareneway.com/inquisition.htm)

(7) The inquisition, [www. thenazareneway. com/inquisition. htm](http://www.thenazareneway.com/inquisition.htm)

(8) The inquisition, [www. thenazareneway. com/inquisition. htm](http://www.thenazareneway.com/inquisition.htm)

Before the fifteenth century heresy was a crime against the teachings of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church at this time was extremely rich and powerful. Far more powerful than the King of England and the royal heads of Europe. It is a sad reflection therefore that with this power comes also great corruption. The doctrine of the Catholic Church maintained that the laity were to be guided by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and that this hierarchy was given the right to rule over them by God. Heresy is practised both in England and the continent during all of the fifteenth century when break-away groups from the Catholic Church begin to question their doctrine. Educationalists begin to question the methods and teachings of the Catholic Church to the Christian believes and faith. The Catholic Church in England begins to fear an uprising of working and middle-class people and so the King passes a law in 1401 to allow for the burning of heretics and witches.

It is believed that witches and sorcerers have become so abundant that the Catholic Church needs help from the pope to hunt them down and destroy them. This information comes from the papal Inquisition and is unreliable. The evidences that have been acquired have come from people who have been tortured and forced to give confession. The crime of heresy has now become entangled with witches.

Society has now become so fearful that people are unable to trust each other but as people become able to read a bible morality is spread.

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