

To What Extent Was Religion the Most Significant Reason that New Knowledge was Restricted in the Medieval Period, 1381-1481?

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Abstract

The Church was the epicenter of knowledge in the Mediaeval period, and thus the ultimate holder of power. It is noted throughout the years 1384-1481 that the church was assisting knowledge, although only for its own purposes, and restricted any new knowledge outside of the church. For Centuries, historians have disagreed the extent religion has had on scientific and intellectual advancement, with some stating it was the dismissal of the common people that restricted new knowledge, while others claim it was the Church that created dismissal, as all knowledge and thus all consequences are held by it. However, the Medieval period was a time of rapid change, with famine, war and disease ravaging Europe, thus before historians can blame the Church for restricting new knowledge, the historical context must be fully dissected, as it is only then that the extent to which religion restricted new knowledge can be fully understood.

Religion has been the ultimate source of social control for much of the world's history, notably 1381-1481. This period was littered with social discontent and rapid change, especially surrounding the discovery of new knowledge and the restrictions in sharing it. To an extent religion was the most significant reason for that restriction in this period. To what extent this is has been and still is heavily debated among historians. The strongest counterarguments are that the economy, social resistance, xenophobia, or the lack of mass printing, were the most significant reasons that new knowledge was restricted in 1381-1481, as they were major sources of public control. The opposition argues that the Church greatly assisted new knowledge such as the invention of the clock, becoming mainstream across Europe within this period. The moral restrictions of religion contributed to the resistance of new knowledge, God's wrath in the form of famine war and plagues. This stems from the Church's control of information, therefore everything connected to the Church has an agenda, and the Church is connected to all of society. This resulted in anti-clerical movements such as Italian humanism, and the early Lollard movements.

While small, opposition to the Church did exist, such as the early Lollard movements. Although founded by John Wycliffe, his death in 1384 meant that his predecessor, William Thorpe, would be more directly influential in this time period, due to his emotive and politically charged testimonies. His most notable (Source F) is historically referenced as 'Preface', made in 1407 after his imprisonment; which acts as evidence of the church's control itself. He opens stating that his motivations for writing the piece is by

popular demand of other people. "diver's friends [...] 'have come to me in prison, and counselled me busily'. However, he does state he is speaking 'on God's behalf', despite the fact that he is against mortals claiming to be a mouth-piece to God. Not only does this hypocrisy slightly undermine Thorpe's argument, his assumption that many were turning against the corrupt church can be refuted in the bigger historical picture [1]. Brian Harrison states "80%-90%" of Medieval England [2]. It can also be inferred that those that many not have been regular churchgoers, likely believed in God to some extent due to society's emphasis on it. Although Source F does pay homage to what is arguably history's first organized anti-clerical movement, acting as a display of emerging social change around religion which would grow over time.

However, pieces of media were trying to reflect on and or alter this way of thinking. Such as Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, first published in 1476. Chaucer was well connected to the humanist movement (though never an active member himself) and these beliefs were high-lighted in his work. For example, outlining the distinct differences between God and the man-made built church, and exposing church corruption. He was able to evade persecution through claiming creative license. Though he issued public apology for any offence caused. It is through this media that historians can understand the impact of religious censorship. This is evident in Prehan's claim, that the Church "had exploited the exclusivity of the Latin language for its own agenda." This is supported by the fact that only 2% of Europeans in the Medieval pe-rod could read Latin [3,4]. However, Prehan was a student at the

time of writing this specific piece, meaning his limited knowledge must be noted concerning his value in debating the extent to which religion was the most significant reason new knowledge was restricted in the given date range. William Thorpe was an academic at Oxford University, seeing church censorship first-hand. He was the first person to fully translate the Bible into English, in 1382; for which he was imprisoned until 1384. This pays testament to the church's control of justice system. Furthermore, it could be argued that religion was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. However, social resistance is arguably a result to religion, making it more of an effect than a cause.

Censorship, was also prevalent in terms of literacy, considering most boys were taught to read English, or not at all. Whereas Latin, the language of the bible was reserved for the wealthy, usually connected to the Church themselves. Though to the lack of mass printing at the time, most clergy didn't have a full bible, those who did were too high ranking to have a congregation. Thus, the average clergyman's understanding was rarely fully developed, having a knock-on effect on society and their perception of the bible and faith overall. Although, the clergy was by no means immune from the fear of God, arguably even more vulnerable to it. Therefore, Prehan's idea of clergyman purposely enforcing individual interpretations is an unlikely generalization.

On the other hand, this is supported by the Lollard movement led by John Wycliffe. Lollards were one of the first groups to oppose the church's restrictions of knowledge, notably the inaccessibility of the Latin bible. In Source E the Gospel of Grace Wycliffe stated the following. 'Men ought, for their salvation, to trust wholly to Christ, not to seek to be justified by any other way.' This depicts the emotional depth of the issue felt by people of the time by attacking the Churches 'all-perfect righteousness.' However, there is little evidence of the Lollards taking any measure to force change outside of words, making the source evidence of a weak opposition to the church. If the religious situation was as bad as Wycliffe states, why was action never taken. Moreover, this source could be interpreted as evidence that the restriction of knowledge in the years 1381-1481 was a result of social preoccupation with more pressing issues. Such as failed harvests and looming famine as Hoskins notes [4]. However, these hardships were often blamed on ungodly actions, which prevented people from drawing solutions such as crop rotation.

Although Hudson disagrees, stating it was "a phenomenon worthy of attention in its own right". Such views on the Wycliffe legacy can also be supported by historical evidence. In 1427, Wycliffe's grave was robbed by supporters who burnt his bones and scattered the ashes, giving him a far more dignified service than his execution that the Church deprived him of. This event shows the significance of Wycliffe's words and the extent to which people felt towards the church. Though this was likely more an act of anti-clericalism which Wycliffe had come to symbolize, rather than the churches restriction of knowledge. Furthermore, the Italian education debate and the significance of John Wycliffe over 40 years after his death

act as evidence that religion was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481 to a substantial extent.

Matthew C. Harrington states in 'The Theology of The Peasant's Revolt' that "every aspect of the Peasants' Revolt and its suppression was inspired and guided by strong religious forces" This interpretation is valuable as it acknowledges the significance of factors outside of theology in The Peasant's Revolt, while maintaining that religion was not only a major factor, but sparked a change in societies view of it, thereby kickstarting a monumental change sent to span through the 14th Century [5]. John Ball noted how many financial and social issues have religion at their source in a public sermon before the revolt. This could in turn act as evidence against the claim that religion the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481, as it spread awareness of societies corruption and the rights of the common people. Therefore, the 1381 Peasant's Revolt provides both historical and primary evidence to argue that religion was not the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481; since in this case religion spread knowledge rather than restricted it.

The Church's major control over information expanded to the control of society as a whole, this was largely due the ease of putting the fear of God into its many followers. It was widely believed that the Black Death of 1348 was caused by the wrath of God. The church, and thereby society blamed the likes of Roger Bacon, who believed no theological matters could be explained without proven mathematics. Bacon was later imprisoned for this and blamed for causing the Black Death. This had massive impact on public fear of defying the Church. Leah DeCesare states the plague's aftermath brought about a "complex interchange of power." This can be factually supported by Church holding medical control across Europe. In isolation this could act as evidence that religion was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. Especially concerning the tunnel vision surrounding medicine, refusing to validate any theories outside of the Church approved Hypocrites and Galen; which led to more factual theories being ignored.

However, there was church-supported medical advancements which evolved into or are practices still in use today. Such as the idea of miasma, which later evolved into an understanding of infectious disease. Many monasteries also operated as hospitals, often providing the only medical care available. While this is often criticized for only providing prayer, the Church cannot be blamed for a worldwide lack of medical knowledge. Moreover, religion was not the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. Especially concerning medical advancement as the Church not only made great efforts to assist but have little control over lacking scientific understanding. Despite that the Church were a major source of social fear, history has proven that this doesn't stop rebellion, and so the lack of scientific knowledge was likely just that, a lack of knowledge not knowledge restricted by the Church. However,

it must be acknowledged that the churches social control likely slowed new knowledge in 1381-1481 due to the social fear it created. Especially concerning medicine after the Black Death.

The extent of the economic struggle in 1381-1481 is evident in the following primary statistics from source H , 56% of English labor's pre-1550 died before the age of 15, with the average life expectancy rounding to 19-25 years old, therefore it could be argued that there were more significant concerns than knowledge and society ignored it rather than restricting it [6]. Source I outline how English and wider European economy is also hindered by lacking trade power, with England not making a credible output trade profit until the early 16th Century. This was due to the expansion of the wool trade, made possible using industrial machinery unavailable in the Medieval period. Perhaps if society had been more open to new ideas, they would have had the means to boost the economy. However, the same economic struggle that prevents the investment into new knowledge, also prevents the technology needed to better the financial situation. Thereby there's legitimate historical grounds to argue that the economy was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. However social resistance encouraged by religion prevented economic improvement, thereby the primary issue remains religion.

It's important to note the close relationship between the Church and the economy, as it's something the Church largely controlled. This is evident in the 1381 Peasants Revolt, the causes of this ranged from Richard II to economic reasons such as the Statue of Labor's, and the preaching of John Ball. Before divulging the significance of economic and religious factors, the issue of the monarchy must be assessed as it contributes to both. Edward III believed strongly in the Divine Right of Kings, likely contributing to his confidence in the Hundred Years War (1437-1453). These military campaigns left England's finances in tatters, leading the 1381 Poll Tax, which in turn caused a mass spike in poverty and displacement. Regarding economic downfall, the possibility of economics being the most significant reason that knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481 comes into play. As even if there was an appetite for new knowledge the detrimental state of the European economy left even the most prevalent scholars with lacking research funds, with national focuses now turning to preserving the live of the starving and diseased. Moreover, xenophobia could be viewed as the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481; supported with events such as the Hundred Years War. However, the cause of the Hundred Years War stemmed from the entitlement of The Divine Right of kings, and so religion is the source of any socioeconomic issues caused.

It may also be the case that society resistance to anything new was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. It's no secret that religion was the only path of reasoning most people knew during this period, so anything outside of God's word was sinful by default. The effect the Bible had on people's everyday lives is evident in the passages from a Medieval nun's diary source B [7]. The nun (referred to

as Egeria) is expressing her desire to be reunited with her fellow sisters after taking a pilgrimage to the ascent of Sinai. 'one on which the majesty of God descended'. Egeria seemly has no issue with independently expressing her gratitude and loyalty to God, evident when she expresses, she doesn't think such beauty could exist 'without the grace of God'. Although, when expressing her loneliness or physical pain. Saying the journey was a 'great labor'. on foot, conveys her selfishness, using biblical quotation such as, 'Do you, then, my good ladies, [...] deign to think of me'.

Source B is primary evidence that many people of the Medieval period were increasingly reliant on religion. This made them unlikely and unwilling to accept anything that could jeopardize their holy salvation. However, source B is limited in its value in relation to the given question as the date of its origin is unknown, with estimates ranging from the 1100's to the 1300's. However, it does strengthen the argument that religion was intrinsic to everyday life. This shows how influential the Church and its teachings were. Not just those who worked for the organization and those who could read and write but all members of society. In addition, Source B could have inaccuracies due to the need for it to be translated from the original text into English. With any translation there's opportunity for error and translator's bias. Source B acts as evidence of religions social power, and thus its ability to restrict new knowledge, though its reliability is limited. Although despite its limitations Source B is evidence of religion's social impact and allows modern historians to understand why choosing salvation over knowledge was non-negotiable for most.

Van Engen agrees with the notion that social resistance was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. Calling Christianity in the Middle Ages a "Historiographical Problem". Both Van Engen's view and the nun's diary act as a reminder that the people of the Church are criticized for restricting knowledge and notes that few people were willing to consider alternatives to religion. Therefore, it's helpful to consider what contemporaries call censorship, which the medieval church saw as the protection of God 's children.

However, the prevalence of Church censorship cannot be ignored. Drucker states "the self-policing of publication was already in place well before the advent of printing [8]." The professional guild of stationers, so named because they "stationed" themselves in place around the cathedrals in the medieval towns, had a strong self-interest in controlling access to and production of texts and their copies." This was evident in the Forgery of the Alleged Donation of Constantine. The Alleged Donation of Constantine detailed how to Pope had complete control of Rome and regions of the Western Empire. The public was told this doctrine was made in the 4th Century by the powerful ancestors of high-ranking churchmen. Prominent Italian Humanist Lorenzo Valla wasn't convinced of this and found evidence to prove the document had been forged, and in fact, written in the 8th century. He discovered and presented his findings in 1440. In a public speech he stated the following: "For during some centuries now, either they have not known that the Donation of Constantine is spurious and forged, or else they

themselves forged it, and their successors walking in the same way of deceit as their elders.” This revelation openly displayed how the Church abused the trust of devoted followers to justify gaining yet more power for a few select mortals who claim to have a godly connection [9]. Acting as evidence that religion was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the years 1381 – 1481. Note that the Church gave no punishment. On the contrary, Pope Nicholas V invited him to Rome in 1447. He later became a papal scribe and in 1455, a papal secretary. This hospitality was likely a strategic decision by the Church and its current Pope, who wished to separate themselves from a recent public display of corruption, making the voice of the people one of their own. Though the fact that the Church forged public political information for their own benefit, is undeniable evidence that religion was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481.

The Catholic Church was a major source of education, shown not only through basic literacy opportunities, but Europe’s leading universities. St Andrew’s opened in 1413, funded almost entirely by the Church. At face value, this seems to go against the claim that religion was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. However, the Church oversaw the content of this education, and discounting anyone who opposed its teachings. This was publicly displayed in Italy amidst Humanist protests against church corruption. Petrus Paulus Vergerius warns that the inability of study to consider knowledge outside of church censorship; “lies that great danger to character, [...] which in turn gives rise to a disregard of truth in all relations of life” This primary source depicts the Church’s contextual opposition, being that a Church education was essentially a form of censorship, if used in isolation of other ideas [10]. Source A also has the foresight to foreshadow the continuity of the issue, calling it, ‘a fault apt to become ingrained as years roll by.’ this assumption is now a proven historical fact. Moreover, the Italian education debate acts as evidence that religion was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481.

There’s a strong case to argue xenophobia was a significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. Whittington uses the Hundred Years War as an example since the mid-15th Century bore the brunt of the war’s civil unrest. Whittington states ‘differences between the two kingdoms were being pronounced and praised by their respective supporters, separating the opposing kingdom as “them,” who are inferior to “us.” This can be supported by Source D, the popular anti-Flemish verse including lines such as “And therefore, ye Flemmynges, that Flemmynges ben named, to compare with Englishmen, ye aught be ashamed!” The Flemish were demonized by accusation due to their allegiance with the French acting as yet more evidence that faction was rife as the country became increasingly divided in the mists of a civil war [11,12]. Not only did this spread misinformation about opposing nationalities and regions but put people in no mood to discover and comprehend new knowledge. There is an argument for xenophobia being the root of religions,

economic and social restrictions of new knowledge. By this logic xenophobia would be the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. Although the 1478 Spanish Inquisition is at face value a religious dispute, it is widely noted that xenophobia towards Israelites and the Arabic was the primary motivation. Geraldine Heng outlines how religious prejudice often resulted in xenophobia and racism in her book *The Invention of Race in the Middle Ages*. “The vilification of Jews for supposedly possessing a fetid stench, a male menses, subhuman and bestial qualities, and a congenital need to ingest the blood of Christian children whom they tortured and crucified to death [13].”

Heng’s examples of the stereotypes applied to people of Middle Eastern religions, gives historical context to events such as Pope Sixtus IV’s papal decree of 1478, when he called upon Catholic monarchs to assist in the eradication of Jewish people from Spain. While Heng’s view is helpful in proving religion was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in 1381-1481, it depicts religion can lead to the secondary issue of xenophobia and even genocide. Which is arguably more significant in practice not only due to its mortality rate, but since this discrimination has been experienced throughout history and is today. Therefore, xenophobia is a timeless social factor, with religion at its source.

Some historians, cite 15th Century Spain as the birthplace of racism as we understand it today. Gorsky, claims the Spanish categorization and treatment of Jews “provided the final seedbed for Christian Negrophobic racism,” escalating the concern over,” purity of blood [...] an early conception of biological race [14].” This rare perspective is helpful to prove that xenophobia was a significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481, it has its drawbacks. Though Gorsky notes that the discrimination against the Spanish Jews peaked decades earlier, in 1391, anti-Jewish mobs coined the slogan “convert or die.” Almost half of the Spanish Jews (the largest community in Europe at the time) were converted to Christianity. This was the greatest mass conversion in modern Jewish history, not even closely rivaled by the Spanish Inquisition. Though it is important to note that Gorsky himself is Jewish making his extensive knowledge of Jewish persecution expected and perhaps biased. Highlighted by the fact that he fails to acknowledge Muslim suffering in genocides such as the Spanish Inquisition. Therefore, while there’s a strong case to argue xenophobia was a significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, 1381-1481, this can only be solidly proven in isolated events, meaning religion outdoes it overall.

While other factors opposing religion did contribute to the restriction of new knowledge; 1381-1481. Another factor, the inability to spread this new knowledge across on the rare occasion religion allowed it would remain an issue with or without the other secular factors. This was hugely impacted by the printing press. While invented in 1440, it didn’t arrive in Britain until 1481. With it came the ability to mass print, and the newspaper became commonplace in the later decades. This unprecedented

availability of information pushed a major increase in literacy and general education. For many, this was the first time that people could interpret information for themselves, rather than someone telling them a biased interpretation of the meaning. This also meant knowledge from other countries could be spread seemingly across the globe. However, some religious groups were opposed to this, especially in the Middle East. McDonald notes “Most Eastern religion communities also rejected the moveable type of press” [15]. This supports the view that religion was the most significant reason new knowledge was restricted in the years 1381-1481. McDonald recognizes that the knowledge spread by the printing press was ethnocentric as an effect of this. “As a result, the earliest printed religious texts are almost exclusively from Christian documents from Europe.” Meaning any knowledge spread by the printing press would still be restricted by religion, as more developed Middle Eastern practices in medicine couldn’t be shared on a large international scale until much later. Muslim sectors increasingly saw the benefits to mass prints, though some of the most extreme are still opposed to it today, displaying a continuity in religion’s restriction of knowledge despite modern globalization, increasing the restrictions of knowledge [16]. Drucker opposes this to an extent, stating the restriction of knowledge was under catholic control” long before” mass print. Moreover, both religious control and opposition to the printing press acts as further evidence that religion was the most significant reason new knowledge was restricted in the years 1381-1481.

Usher states the printing press had a huge impact on “market for ideas”. This can be seen via the impact mass printing had on the Protestant Reformation; eventually breaking the religious monopoly of the Catholic Church [17]. The printing press also assisted the economy, as Usher also notes. “Printing is one of the first instances of the substitution of mechanical devices for direct hand work in the interests of accuracy and refinement in execution as well as reduced cost. By capitalistic methods and mass production, a new and superior product was evolved.” However, Eisenstein disagrees stating that “after five hundred years the muse of history still remains outside” [of the printing press] since “almost no studies are devoted to the consequences that ensued once the printers had begun to ply their new trade throughout Europe [18].”

Eisenstein is correct to note that “the volume of celebration for the printing press far outweighs the explanation of its praise [19].” Although to say “there is almost no studies” is a board generalization likely serving her own anti-print agenda, as Eisenstein regularly implies that print undermines the importance of primary sources and historical authenticity. Her other works such as ‘Divine Art, Infernal Machine: The Reception of Printing in the West from First Impressions to the Sense of an Ending’. Therefore, Eisenstein is unlikely to acknowledge any positive consequences of the printing press despite a strong case being made for them by earlier historians such as Usher; meaning Eisenstein cannot blame hindsight for their dismissal of the printing press. Mass printing changed global communication forever, and regardless of which reason was the most significant new knowledge was restricted

in the Medieval period, 1381-1481. The printing press eased this restriction like never before. Its only opposition was religion which steadily decreased beyond this date range, possibly as a result of increased intellectual awareness. Therefore, evidence suggests that religion was the most significant reason new knowledge was restricted in 1381-1481. Though the printing press was the catalyst for the spreading of knowledge, arguably making this period ‘s legacy a journey to enlightenment.

Critically speaking, while religion has been proven to assist new knowledge, this does not counteract the extent to which it jeopardized it. Religion is logically the most significant reason knowledge was restricted as it’s linked to all the opposing factors concerning this argument, such as social resistance, the economy, and xenophobia. While opposing reasons are valid, this doesn’t discount religions overall significance. Therefore, while historians such as Einstein, Heng and Gorksy make valid points, Usher and McDonald make stronger points concerning whether religion was the most significant reason that new knowledge was restricted in the Medieval period, as they acknowledge this and its social importance. Thereby, religion was significant in the restriction of new knowledge in the Medieval period, 1381-1481 to a large extent, due to its restriction on all aspects of society, restricting knowledge [20-36].

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