The Art of Chivalry Within the Church

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415: Joan of Arc

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When we think of the Christian church of the modern-day, it is hard to believe how much political power it had possessed in the past. As the rising political phenom, it was in control of many aspects of everyday life and determined the roles of the people it governed. The Middle Ages were no different when it came to the power of the church. While the time period is associated with King Arthur and his knights of the round table, this is not to be true. The art of chivalry was very much alive and acted on, but it is not as cut and dry as it seems. How has the input of the church through religion shaped arms and chivalry in the Middle Ages? Chivalry was influenced by the Church in more ways than one. Through the religious acts involving war, the shift in the church’s beliefs, and the example of Joan of Arc, the Christian church along with religion, were an influencer on the art of chivalry during the medieval era of Europe.

In matters of conflict, religion is heavily involved between both parties. Christine de Pizan in her work titled *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry,* has discussed the relationship of religion and the church with the acts of battles within her work. Christine in this excerpt claims that battles and wars undertaken due to a dispute and concluded were an act from God in regards to justice.[[1]](#footnote-0) In the example she used, she takes it straight from the bible when Jesus was ordered by God to ambush his enemies in order to overcome them.[[2]](#footnote-1) This shows the relationship between the Christian faith and war are justified in a sense of starting a battle. If it leads to a conclusion and all ends well, it is viewed as a gift from God to relay justice on those who deserve it. Religion is thought as a guide for the people, but what if faith and hierarchy come to a fighting point? Who is right in the eyes of God?

In this time period, war and chivalry are influenced by religion and a reason for this is due to the relationship religion has in everyday life during the 13th century Europe. A person that is no stranger to this is the pope himself. Another excerpt mentioned by Christine de Pizan is in regards to the pope and whether he can declare war on the emperor.[[3]](#footnote-2) Now this is considered an unusual circumstance when it comes to war between that of the church and of the monarchy. Of course, if war is avoidable in this case, that is the first course of action to follow. According to Christine, neither the pope nor the emperor should declare war on each other. They should act in a way that Jesus would and act not in vengeance, but sufferance.[[4]](#footnote-3) If war was to partake between the two, Christine uses the example of Pope Alexander the third to seek refuge through another king and regain his status and his position.[[5]](#footnote-4) If those of the Christian faith help their brethren, they would be doing right by God, just like the princes that helped Pope Alexander the third. While these messages come from a lady who had spent her time researching the material to provide for those who partake in this lifestyle, Geoffroi de Charny was a man who lived and breathed chivalry.

Geoffroi de Charny was a man who was a knight during this chivalrous time. He had lived during the early 14th century and is known for his vivacious personality during his knighthood. The opening of his work entails, “His adult life coincided with the opening phase of the series of Anglo-French conflicts we call the Hundred Years War (traditionally 1337-1483).”[[6]](#footnote-5) His account in this work provides an insight to what life was like as a knight during the crucial war between France and Britain at this time in history.

The main insight from Geoffroi de Charny that will be focused on is his insights on the relationship a knight has with God on page 105 of *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry.* This section of the book titled, “A Good Man-At-Arms Can Be Pleasing to God”, is focused on the relationship a knight has with God. While this section has a mood that is set to boost the image of Geoffroi, it has some insights to the thought of why these men sign up to become knights and those who participate in the act of chivalry. In summary of the ideas presented, Geoffroi creates the image that Knights that go good deeds and fight in the name of God are in his favor. In a quote of the prayer he states on page 106, “...in abandoning any desire to commit all these evil deeds, pray with all your hearts to the glorious Virgin Mary that with her benign and humble grace and by the holy influence she has over her precious, glorious and sovereign Lord, Father and Son, that of His noble gentle tender mercy.”[[7]](#footnote-6) This presents the idea that if these knights give and act in the name of God and the Christian faith, their act of Chivalry are justified as long as they continue to act like good Christians. This creates the idea that through religion, the art of chivalry is accepted and encouraged as long as it is done through the Christian faith.

While Geoffroi de Charny paints the picture that these knights were undoubting men that lived and breathed Christianity, Robert Kaeuper paints a picture that these knights were not so attached to the church as it would seem. Kaeuper understands the relationship between the church and knighthood, but feels that it is not fully understood without exploring the independence of the knights.

His main point of focus for this section on his work is focused on tournaments to create this image of independence from the church’s ideals. The first of his focus was the tournaments the knights would hold to present their skills to their peers, however the church did not like these events as it mocked warfare and held a sense of pompousness surrounding the event.[[8]](#footnote-7) The church viewed these tournaments as an act of sin and tried countless attempts to end this part of the chivalric lifestyle. Due to the works of Charny and Lancaster, the church could not end this section of their practices as both Charny and Lancaster wrote the importance of these tournaments.[[9]](#footnote-8) This gives the idea of a little independence to those who practice chivalry. As one could say the attempt to end tournaments separated the church from the art of chivalry, this interpretation is not to be so. By the church trying to separate the knights from this aspect of their life, it did not stop the knights from following the bible and practicing Christianity. The church, in a sense, by trying to end tournaments is still using religion to influence chivalry. While in this case it is to end something, it still counts as it is trying to mold a new lifestyle out of an event not satisfied by the church. People are human and have their own needs and wants, but just because one aspect of their lifestyle is not accepted, it does not mean that they do not value their religion.

In an article written by Matthew Strickland, he introduces the act to be known as judicial combat. Judicial combat is the act of two parties selecting a member to duel with the intent that God would support the side that was destined to be correct.[[10]](#footnote-9) The men chosen before these combats would spend their times before the duel to pray, confess their sins, and fast in the name of God to protect themselves during the duels.[[11]](#footnote-10) The church plays a role religiously in these duels to take matters out of their hands on who was right and who was wrong. Everything in these duels was left to God, even if things may have been swayed to keep the reputation of both parties involved. To fully leave the matter into God’s hands, those involved would have to take the David and Goliath approach when selecting their person to duel.[[12]](#footnote-11) The thought is to pick a member that would resemble David in abilities and if that side was chosen as the right side in the matter, God would give the contender the strength to take down the opposing team. There are many instances that men would use this tactic to boost their image and create a farce with the other party and not even act out the combat to create a better image for themselves. Through combat, they can create stories and speak about how God protects them to show that they are the chosen one. Even so, with the fear of death, the fear of not being the chosen one to be correct is just enough for the knights to not partake in the activity. It is all about the story and perceptions. With that being the case, it shows how religion of the Christian church plays a role in the art of chivalry. It does so through the acts of conflict and the process it takes to take part in acts of combat. While it may be thought that the act of chivalry is only partaken with men, in an article by Mclaughlin, it appears this is not the case.

Towards the beginning of the Middle Ages, the church did not pay attention to the actions of what we know today as women warriors. It was until much later that these women interfered with their message. In Megan Mclaughlin’s excerpt, “The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare and Society in Medieval Europe”, she states, “before the end of the eleventh century, chroniclers generally noted the activities of women warriors with little comment.”[[13]](#footnote-12) It was not until much later in the Middle Ages that this behavior was more recognized by historians of their time. Most of the data on these women center around the middle of the Middle Ages. Why was this behavior becoming more recognized? The behavior of these women was becoming more recognizable within society, even though it was considered a rarity, it was no longer tolerated within society's guidelines of what was acceptable.[[14]](#footnote-13) These women were becoming beyond their stature to take part in an act that was deemed masculine. When were these acts of chivalry acceptable? Well, in the case of the Christian church, the main focus of this paper, it was deemed acceptable when the members did not have to participate. It states on page 199 of Mclaughlin’s piece, “And finally, there were those who made war for the faith, or at least for the leaders of the Church. In Italy, Matilda of Tuscany, that "most prudent war-leader and most faithful soldier of St. Peter," defended the reforming popes of the late eleventh century from their enemies.”[[15]](#footnote-14) To clarify the matter, it was perfectly okay for these women to act out in the eyes of society, as long as the church benefitted. A prime example of this clause leads into the next big case that made history, Joan of Arc and her calling from God.

To add some context, during the time of Joan of Arc, France and England had been participating in the One Hundred Years war to fight over ownership and titles. With the rising career of Joan brewing, France was having an unsuccessful time getting the upper hand of Britain. In the work written by Kelly DeVries, it explains the war into an act of four phases with France really only winning one out of the four phases compared to Britain.[[16]](#footnote-15) It was not until Joan fulfilled her message from God and became the leader of the french army that things started to look up in battle. As a young girl, Joan had heard a message from God sent to her to fulfill her legacy as what we know of today. As she grew into the woman presented in history, the messages shifted to that of militaristic ideals to help France fight the war.[[17]](#footnote-16) This forms a connection between chivalry and Christianity through a spiritual force. While it cannot be proven if these voices were real, it can only be assumed in this case that they were. These voices from God set up her future to form her history and the history of a woman warrior during the Middle Ages. While this is essential to her history, the focus of this approach is going to be maintained during her trial to see the relationship between Joan and her faith and those who question her validity.

Upon being captured by the british and taken in for questioning, Joan’s sentence was already chosen for her by the clergy in charge of the trial. The trial was meant to put those not in their correct spot to be punished along with boosting the career of the clergy in charge of the trial. Joan in the eyes of the church is an outlier of what a proper woman should be. Joan insisted on wearing men’s garments and fulfilling her role on the battlefield. No matter the discretion or the manipulation from the clergy could bend her will against what she believed. The trial had to be done properly in due time to make it seem as if it was valid in their discretions towards Joan. The first method of validity was to allow Joan to participate in the Siege of Orléans. It states in Hobbins’ work, “After receiving their cautious approval, he sent her to Orléans...More than anything else she accomplished, her supporters considered this victory the great sign of Joan’s authenticity.”[[18]](#footnote-17) Not only does this moment confirm part of her message from God, it also creates a shift in what the church considers a miracle. Due to her success, it makes it so that she is seen as a messenger from God and creates this relationship between herself and the church. The church allowed her to use her chivalry and influenced the church and the people of France to create this image of Joan. Because she is a woman doing the work of a man, it brings a questionable stance to her mission. It is not until her luck runs dry at the attack to take back Paris that she loses her status in the eyes of the clergy and leads to the end that is well known today.

From the many perspectives from those who have lived through the Middle Ages and those taking a peek into the lives of those who lived through the experience, it is clear to see that religion is fully integrated into the lives of the people. Whether it be a knight or a peasant girl, religion is important to the people. No matter if religion approves or disapproves of the choices they made then, it was always a factor on the battlefield, in single combat between people, and the destinies sent out through angels. Religion of the Christian church influences the art of chivalry because of the way it impacts the peoples lives.

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   University Press, 2003, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Ibid., 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid., 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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7. Ibid., 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Richard Kaeuper. *Holy Warriors: The Religious Ideology of Chivalry.* Philadelphia:

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    Warfare of the High Middle Ages.” *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare*, n.d., 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Ibid., 317-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Ibid., 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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14. Ibid., 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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16. Kelly DeVries. *Joan of Arc: A Military Leader.* Stroud, Gloucestershire: History Press, 2011, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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