

What role did mysticism play in the history of the Church?

Mysticism had the affect of stirring up desire for God within the Church. It gave an outlet for people who were disgusted with mere outward duties of the Church or saw corruptions in the Church that they were reacting against.

The main things that motivated the rise of mysticism were the following. First of all, it was a reaction to the mental work of scholasticism. People were drawn not just to know about God or explain doctrines, they wanted to actually have direct contact with Him and experience Him.

Another factor leading to the rise of mysticism was the spiritual vacuum created by the “Babylonian Captivity of the Church” and the “Great Schism” in the late 14th (early 15th) century. There was no real clear leadership in the church; people weren’t sure who to follow as the pope. Therefore, many turned to mysticism as a way to seek God directly.

The Bubonic Plague also was a factor influencing mysticism. Life was very uncertain with so many people dying. This created a hunger in people to know God.

Mysticism was also a reaction to the corruption within the church. Corrupt practices such as simony, concubinage, and nepotism left people feeling disillusioned with the supposed “church leaders”. They instead sought to know God directly, for themselves.

Some of the leading women mystics were Christina of Markyate, Julian of Norwich, and Catherine of Sienna. Christina wanted to join the church as a nun, but her parents didn’t want her to. When they sent in her fiancé to ruin her celibacy, she was fully clothed and debated him on the matter of celibacy (and won). She ran away from home and lived as a nun for 20 years under the care of a monk named Roger. Eventually she went as a nun to St. Albans and had a great influence in civil affairs in England.

Julian of Norwich was another leading mystic. She became a recluse in Norwich and lived the rest of her life shut inside her room attached to the church building. She had revelations about Jesus and wrote “Revelations of Divine Love”. She thus popularized the idea of Jesus as Mother.

Another leading mystic was Catherine of Sienna, who at a young age was very influential. She helped to take care of and heal people during the Bubonic plague, she had the stigmata of Christ, and eventually reached the state of “marriage to Christ”. She was influential politically in that she helped to negotiate a truce between her country of Florence and France. She also spoke boldly with the pope about moving the center of the church back to Rome from Avignon.

There are a number of connections between mysticism and the Reformation. Mysticism encouraged a direct relationship with God, not going through any intermediaries, such as priests or the pope. They were not rebelling against authority, but they just emphasized a direct contact with God. This is also one of the basic tenants of the Reformation. Martin Luther called it the “priesthood of all believers”, which said that there was no need for intermediaries between God and man; the work of Christ already accomplished that reconciliation.

They were alike in other ways in such things as both spoke out against the corruptions in the church. As mysticism sometimes challenged priests and popes, so would the Reformation leaders did. Mystics tended to be free-thinkers, not under any jurisdiction of man. This same kind of free-thinking is seen in the Reformers.