

# How one religious idea gave us the best beer in the world



Recently, I met a gentleman who, upon discovering I taught theology, asked me what was the good of studying religious ideas in our secular world today. When I told him religious ideas have continually made the world a better place, he challenged me to name one. I told him there are plenty of simple religious ideas that have created such a ripple effect that they changed the course of history, and shared a few of them with him.

Here's the first of those world-changing ideas.

## **THE IDEA: THAT RELIGIOUS DEVOTION CAN BE EXPRESSED THROUGH MANUAL LABOR**

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a group of extremely devout monks withdrew to a monastery in Cistercium, near Dijon, to live under the strictest interpretation of the Rule of St. Benedict.

They embraced a severe form of asceticism, seeking to be purified and strengthened for a life-long labor of prayer. They also refused to accept any feudal revenues, believing it to be sullied by the church's collusion with the state. We're talking about hardcore monks here.

They combed the writings of Benedict, looking for ever-more demanding ways to submit themselves to God, when they came across this reference in the forty-eighth chapter of the Rule, which states: “...*for then are they monks in truth, if they live by the work of their hands.*”

The work of their hands? The Cistercians, as they later became known, were devoted to prayer and study, not work. So they introduced manual labor for monks as a principal feature of their common life and the primary means of

their financial support (since they refused to accept any filthy lucre from the state).

They took the Benedictine motto, *Ora et labora*—Pray and Work, very literally. But the working part wasn't simply about funding the monastery. They worked in their fields *for God!*

You might not think it, but this simple idea – that a monk should express their piety through work – changed European society forever.

For a zealous monk, prayer is an offering to the divine, the primary expression of devotion to God. Monks were taught to pray from before dawn until after sunset. But now, the Cistercians added work as a true mark of godly devotion.

And if you're going to embrace manual labor as way to express love to your God, then you'll work as devoutly as you pray. And if you see your work as part of your religious vocation, then you're going to work extremely hard and for long hours, aren't you?



The insertion of this simple religious idea – that manual labor can be an act of consecration – turned the Cistercians into lean, hard-working men. They worked as tirelessly as they prayed. They reclaimed unwanted or marginal land and worked it constantly, becoming in effect a large, disciplined, unpaid labor force.

They were also free from the tariffs and taxes imposed by feudal lords.

This made their business enterprises—whether wheat or wool or beer—remarkably profitable, which helped finance the founding of even more monasteries.

Providentially, an impressive young aristocrat-turned-monk, Bernard of Clairveaux took over the reins of the Cistercians. Bernard wasn't only a dedicated man of God, he also had a head for expanding the movement. With the profits from their agricultural ventures, and a steady stream of young men now signing up to the order, Bernard rolled Cistercian monasteries out all across Europe. No other religious body had grown so greatly in so brief a time. By his death, Bernard had directly founded 68 monasteries and

overseen the establishment of another 270 monasteries from Sweden to Portugal and from Scotland to the eastern Mediterranean.

Remember too, monks are also well-educated, so they began experimenting with new and innovative farming techniques, hydraulic engineering, and metallurgy. They developed new approaches to harvesting crops, transportation and fermentation. These techniques were soon adopted by other farmers in the fields of central Italy, and southern France, Spain and the Netherlands. And as a result, all of Europe experienced a massive economic boom in the twelfth century.

Some of these techniques are still in practice today.  
All because of one religious idea.

You might not care much about an economic boom from 900 years ago, but chances are you've tasted the fruits of the Cistercian order whenever you've drunk a European beer, especially if you've been lucky enough to enjoy one brewed by Trappist monks.

In Belgium where there is regarded as the best beer in the world. Brewed by the monks of St Sixtus since 1838, their dark, quadrupel-style Westvleteren "12" has become one of the most sought after beers the world over.

And yet despite their success the Trappist brewers decline all interviews, accept no visitors to the abbey, and despite pleas to increase production, only brew as much beer as needed to finance the community – just under 4,000 barrels (126,000 gallons) a year.

Their motto: **"We make the beer to live but we do not live for beer."**

Think about how a simple religious idea – that work can be an expression of religious devotion – transformed the European farming sector, revived its economy, and made lives better for myriad Europeans for generations to come.

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