



Medieval Christianity: The State of the Field

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Abstract

As in other academic disciplines, historical Christianity in recent years has been energetically navigating the “cultural turn.” Just before the onset of the new millennium, *Church History*, the publication of the American Society of Church History, added the subtitle: *Studies in Christianity and Culture*. The subtitle signaled a recognition that Church History as a discipline had come to embrace a greater breadth than the connotations conveyed by the traditional term “Church History.” More specifically, its frameworks of inquiry had come to reflect a greater appreciation of the many facets of lived religion, a greater engagement with questions of how differently situated Christians interacted either among themselves or with others, and a greater openness to methodological innovation.

The expansiveness in the general study of historical Christianity is nowhere more marked than in the study of Medieval Christianity. Over the course of the last forty years scholarship in this field sloughed off the dual trammels of confessional constructs and nationalist historiography. Scholars drawn to the study of medieval Christianity turned away from debates as to whether and how the “Medieval Church” achieved a sublime synthesis of Christian ideals on earth; or, on the other hand, stumbled through a long errancy from a pure gospel truth. Late twentieth century workers in the vineyard of Medieval Christianity found themselves challenged by the new themes of dominance, subversion, subjectivity, identity and alterity. Liberated from preoccupations as to whether and how it undergirded the imperium and collective virtues of one European country or another, “Medieval Christendom” simultaneously fractured, expanded and ramified. Nevertheless, while the study of Medieval Christianity was developing new frameworks of inquiry (eg. gender, popular practice, performance, Jewish-Christian relations, Muslim-Christian relations, ethnicity, subversion), it remained vigorous in many of its traditional categories (eg. hagiography, mysticism, liturgy, sermon literature, exegesis, monasticism). Taking a bird’s eye view, we can observe four general developments in recent and current work: 1) a continuation of a mid-century shift away from a close identification of Christianity with its largest, wealthiest and most conservative institutions; an interest in the diversity “within” Christian culture or a multiplicity of “cultures” within

Christianity; an interest in the interactions of self-identified Christians with “others”; and an interest in viewing the history of Christianity in a global context.

The 1970s and 1980s saw developments shaped by the methods and interests of social history. Increasingly, scholars sought to observe religious participation and outlook (*mentalite*) throughout a broader social spectrum by examining archival sources (e.g. wills, judicial documents, canonization processes); and by focusing on new groups of people in these as well as in the more “monumental” prescriptive sources (the records of synods, councils, bishoprics, diocese, the papacy).¹ The interest in different social groups nurtured and then blended with a subsequently emerging set of frames that examined cultural layers, levels or micro-cultures. These developments have entailed a stepping away from any strict identification of medieval Christianity with its major institutions. Institutional history now appears less straightforwardly defining, whether the question is periodization, cause and effect or the meaning of events. In general, both the social historical and the cultural approach aspiring to a more sophisticated understanding of religion and religious culture.

Certainly everything worthwhile that can be known about popes, bishops, synods, councils, diocese, monasteries, clerics, their wealth, their thinking and their influence has not been discovered and reported. Indeed, excellent work continues on these subjects. But, the continuing interest in uncovering the activities and experiences of persons and groups who had less or no official status in medieval clerical culture has changed the way the older protagonists enter and define the historical narrative, especially as presented in university and seminary courses.² The work of institution building appears now more contingent, negotiated and in some cases even isolated from contemporary historical events than it did a half century ago.³ Historians are more cautious in their use of texts produced by the exceptionally literate in their efforts to persuade adherence to their particular view of order or orthodoxy. At the same time, there seems to be little interest in *reflexively* aligning the agents and spokespersons of ecclesiastical institutions with the ugly dimensions of power: dominance, oppression, manipulation. Rather a more discursive interest has emerged in observing how power could work, for whom, under what conditions, with what justifications and in relation to what objectives. Recent work has also made us more aware of how at every period orthodoxy (or “normative Christianity”⁴) contained conflicting positions, persistent tensions, and betrayed its ideals. Nevertheless, there is less a tendency now, than previously, under the sway of confessional historiographies to judge most versions of Christianity, lived out amid inconsistencies, as fundamentally and finally corrupt, hypocritical, or delusional.

This does not mean that assessments of medieval Christianity now unfurl in a realm of neutral judgments. There are medievalists who would abolish altogether the use of the term “Christendom” to describe the collectivities

of largely European peoples who generally recognized themselves as sharing (or obliged to share) certain beliefs and practices during a period westerners call the Middle Ages. This stems from a general recognition that the term itself was born together with impulses to exclude and persecute, and could be used to justify all sorts of murderous programs. As reform tends to discover heresy, so the concept of “Christendom” can create violent exclusions. To others, the blockbuster pretensions of the term work against all efforts toward subtlety and detail of rendering. There are still others for whom the term “Christendom” is no different than the term “Christianity,” and is just as susceptible to plurality and fine grained subdivisions. It is for historians a working notion, something apprehended through its particulars, and explored without expectation of finding unanimity.

Those who work with a vision of a multiplicity of cultures within Christianity, or of “micro-Christianities,”⁵ or of the interplay between institutional and para-institutional activities, have, on the whole, added much to our appreciation of Medieval Christianity. They have done this not only by making us see, however refracted, groups, events, sentiments and practices that previously received scant attention, but also by encouraging everybody to think more relationally about his or her special area of expertise.⁶ The same is now true of the recent work focusing on the relations of medieval Christians with Jews and Muslims; or, vice versa.

It was not a large step to move from the diversity within Christianity to diversity “outside” Christianity. And, even while Christianity, as a thing with firm boundaries, was dissolving, work has intensified on points of contact (and conflict) with the “other,” in particular, Jews and Muslims. The trend appears to be following a trajectory that is similar in many ways to the study of women in Christianity. While it began largely with a new look at familiar events, figures and sources, increasingly, new material, culled from diverse regions and source genres, has been and is being published, with the consequence that conclusions have become more complex and qualified. For example, influential early work on Jewish-Christian relations sought the origins of holocaust-heading anti-Semitism in certain medieval developments. But any argument that claimed to locate in the Middle Ages the crucial point or causal chain, after which future persecution was inevitable, posed problems.⁷ Among these, the over-reliance on Christian Latin sources and the over-emphasis on historical Jews-as-victims were both quickly noted. The work of seeing individual and geographically scattered Jews as they saw themselves and as *they* viewed “the other” is now proceeding with the hard work of mastering additional languages and historiographical traditions. Findings may at first glance seem myriad, minute, and without contemporary utility (so, then, *who* and *what* are we to blame?). However, some are small as a microcosm is small. What, for example, do we make of the certainty with which medieval theologians deployed the most modern methods (Aristotelian natural science) to determine that Jewish men menstruated? What does this tell us about

theological rationality? Or about the theologians' understanding of themselves as males? or about their symbolic associations with of blood?⁸ What do we see when, in addition to crusade chronicles and European theological writings about infidels, we look at the interactions of Christians and Muslims located in and around charitable hostels in the non-European regions?⁹

In a fine 1996 collection of articles devoted to *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam*, one contributor, lamented the similarity between the medieval fabulist Mandeville's misperceptions of Muslims and contemporary ones, ruing "our own inability to leave the Middle Ages behind."¹⁰ For those practitioners who would not choose this wish – to leave the Middle Ages entirely behind; or for those who doubt that huge infusions of historical knowledge will produce "Good," the meaning and purpose of studying medieval Christianity is not getting any easier to state. "Tolle, lege!" but who can predict the "learning outcomes"? As the discipline proceeds it demands an ever greater appreciation of the complexity of its records and its objects of scrutiny. Now we see that as the interest in social diversity has moved on to also embrace cultural and religious diversity, the lens has dilated another notch and we have in scholarship and in text books an increase of invitations to look at Christian diversity from a global perspective.

Viewing historical Christianity, even medieval Christianity, in relation to its practice in non-European regions is not without antecedents.¹¹ In its present cycle, some time must pass while many recognize what some have long known: that historically there have been Christians without European pedigrees. It is good that more become aware of how peculiar it sounds to the Christian communities of Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Armenia, Russia, Nubia or Ethiopia when someone refers to Christianity as the religion of "the West." In its first phase, the global approach appears to be finding favor in theological schools to a greater degree than the social or cultural currents have done. Although beguines, heretics, witches, shepherds, lepers, and country priests can readily contribute to theological education by making its clientele more sophisticated about religious thought and practice, conversancy with global plurality of Christianity appears to promise more a straightforward relevance and utility. The pitfall of the global approach is that, faced with so vast a terrain, survey writers may elect to work with a simple view of church and orthodoxy. It is easy to regress into the habit of focusing narrowly on creeds, the most mainstems of orthodoxies and institutions, neglecting the methodologies that have both enlarged and qualified the earlier representations of historical Christianity during Late Antiquity or the Middle Ages.¹²

All of the trends I have identified above reveal a common impulse: to observe Christianity in the past as a nexus of interrelationships rather than as a stolid structure, or as Nietzsche once put it "the last great Roman construction." It would be a shame if we gained the globe only to find it populated with churches whose histories are – like so many monopoly

houses – built with simplified models. If, at first, in the late 60's and 70's, the impulse to pursue popular religion grew from a (more or less) Marxist or (more or less) feminist interest in persons usually omitted from history, few have cultivated their own patch of the non-elite simply as an end in itself or as a stand-alone corrective. If the pursuit of “diversity” (heterodoxy, deviance, ethnicity, identity, gender, multiculturalism) initially found a rationale in parallel preoccupations current in contemporary twentieth-century society and institutions, particularly in American colleges and universities, most serious historians have developed their research, their source base, and their methods to a degree that exceeds in nuance and sophistication the original frameworks of debate. So, we now look forward to the evolution of studies in global Christianity in the Middle Ages, informed by the methods and insights developed in the studies of the other diversities.

Notes

¹ The collection of sources published by R. N. Swanson in his *Catholic England: Faith, Religion and Observance before the Reformation* (Manchester, 1993) provides a good sample of the variety of archival and manuscript sources that can be used to study medieval Christian culture.

² Reviewing seminary and divinity school curricula in the United States and Britain, it appears that Church History or the History of Christianity is being taught less and less as a standard survey course, or set of courses; and that medieval Christianity is the least represented of all historical periods. The teaching of medieval Christianity occurs primarily in religious studies and history departments, and in each, it is far from standard.

³ In fact, there have been all along voices that acknowledged the limits of the influence of dominant figures and ideas, at least within their own time periods. See, for example, Leonard E., Boyle, O. P., *The Setting Of The Summa Theologiae Of Saint Thomas*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1982, who stressed here the private, pastoral, and personal nature of Thomas' work and its limited audience.

⁴ The term is that used by Joseph Lynch in his textbook, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (New York: Longman, 1992) to circumvent some of the pitfalls of “orthodoxy.”

⁵ The term is Peter Brown's in *The Rise Of Western Christendom: Triumph And Diversity, AD 200–1000*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003.

⁶ The following are two good examples of how traditional sources and their specialists are producing new kinds of insights in response to currently prominent themes. Katherine Taglia, “Delivering a Christian Identity: Midwives in Northern French Synodal Legislation, c.1200–1500, in Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler, eds., *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages, York Studies in Medieval Theology*, (York: York Medieval Press, 2001) pp. 77–90; various essays in *Grosseteste: New Perspectives on his Thought and Scholarship*. Ed. J. McEvoy, pp. 357–376. *Instrumenta Patristica*, 27 Turnhout: Brepols, 1995.

⁷ Two influential early works were Jeremy Cohen's *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, Ithaca, 1982; and R. I. Moore's *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. Both have been criticized for insisting too much on the decisiveness of certain activities in the Middle Ages (eg. mendicant preaching, centralization of power by elites) for twentieth century outcomes.

⁸ See Peter Biller, “A ‘Scientific’ View of Jews from Paris around 1300,” *Micrologus* 9 (2001): 137–168 for the role of Aristotle in producing the idea of Jewish male menstruation and its emergence just prior to expulsion of Jews in England. For the the symbolic power and meanings of blood see, most recently, Caroline Walker Bynum, “The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages,” *Church History* 71.4 (2002), pp. 685–715. and “The Power in the Blood: Sacrifice, Satisfaction and Substitution in Late Medieval Soteriology,” in *Redemption*, ed. Gerald O'Collins, Stephen Davis and Daniel Kendall (Oxford University Press, 2004).

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⁹ See Remie Constable's *Housing the stranger in the Mediterranean world: lodging, trade, and travel in late antiquity and the Middle Ages* Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹⁰ Frank Geary in *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, ed. J. Tolan, New York: Columbia University Press. 2002.

¹¹ See, for example the voluminous output of the early twentieth century historian Kenneth Scott Latourette, (d. 1968), whose now outdated surveys have been reissued many times, including the recent *A History Of Christianity*. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2003. The Middle Ages were not a significant period in Latourette's global surveys.

¹² Kathleen E. McVey, "Telling The Whole Story: Christian History In Global Perspective." *Christian Century* (July 17, 2002), a review of *History Of The World Christian Movement*, by Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001). While praising the inclusive motive behind the book, McVey indicates some of the methodological problems with this survey. For example, she notes that the treatment of women in this book not only slights their role in non-Western Christianities but ignores the work that complicates the narrative of "orthodoxy" in the western traditions as well.

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The following bibliography offers a selection of the *most* recent publications and does not generally extend back farther than fifteen years. For quick access to more comprehensive bibliographies relevant to Medieval Christianity, I refer the reader to those compiled by Tom Head at Hunter College and published online at : ; especially 'A Guide to Research in the History of the Medieval Christian Church,' and 'The Study of Christian Practice in the Medieval West.' Other online bibliographies included below, according to theme. One of the most vital areas of recent publication is in the area of sources and translations now available to the student and teacher (see 'Primary Sources,' below, where, primarily with the teacher in mind, I have focused only on collections).

Surveys Focused on Europe

Backman, Clifford, *The Worlds of Medieval Europe*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Although not focused primarily on Christianity, the treatment of diversity and attention to intellectual traditions may suit the way some like to organize their surveys.

Brown, Peter, *The Rise Of Western Christendom: Triumph And Diversity, AD 200–1000*, Blackwell. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003. A substantial revision and enlargement of 1996, which deals more with non-European events, especially Islam, than the title suggests.

Hamilton, Bernard. *Religion in the Medieval West*, Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 2003. Second Edition, revised. This second edition makes fresh efforts to illustrate interaction between lay culture and institutions.

Logan, Donald, F. *The History of the Church in the Middle Age*, London; New York: Routledge, 2002. New, readable, and vivid invitation to fresh encounter with generally familiar territory.

Lynch, Joseph, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History*, London; New York: Longman, 1992.

McManners, John, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 2nd edition. Essays by different authors seek to place Christianity in relation to broad cultural contexts, especially intellectual and artistic ones. Includes essay on Christianity in Asia and Africa.

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