

Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris: Theologians and the University, c.1100–1330

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Author: Ian Wei

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The period of medieval intellectual history covered by this book, primarily the 12th and 13th centuries, is one that has received considerable attention for well over a century. The main question, then, is what does Ian Wei bring to this subject that has not been done before, or how has he reshaped it? The answer is he has done much in both respects. He has added a large amount of material which, if not precisely new, is rarely presented in such detail. And by concentrating on the interface between scholastic thought and medieval social and economic life, he has reshaped the narrative.

In his introduction Wei identifies four aspects of his approach that he considers new. First, he blends institutional and intellectual history by placing the philosophical and theological thought of the period within the development of schools in the 12th century, the emergence of the University of Paris, and the concerns of society outside the schools. Second, he balances more abstract philosophical interests in logic and metaphysics with an emphasis on ethics, moral theology, pastoral mission, and political thought. Third, he broadens the gender dimension of the narrative by giving attention to the intellectual contributions of women, specifically Hildegard of Bingen and Marguerite Porete. And finally, he includes in each chapter an in-depth analysis of problems expounded through the works and words of theologians of the period. By drawing much of his evidence from texts available in translation and choosing issues such as sexuality and economic activity that are of interest to modern students, he is likely to attract a sizeable readership that may be motivated, one hopes, to continue study beyond the pages of this book. While the first of these approaches, namely intellectual history in an institutional and social context, is not really that new but is still insufficiently pursued, the other emphasizes he has introduced do represent a fresh, perceptive, and highly readable approach to the subject. Wei himself, on the basis of his earlier research and publications, is admirably suited to this task.

The book begins with an excellent chapter on the schools of the 12th century, providing a balanced description of the competitiveness among individual teachers in a marketplace of learning, and walking the reader through some of the more difficult parts of logic and theology of the period by using texts and quotations from Abelard, Rupert of Deutz, Goswin (life of), John of Salisbury, and others. Building upon Jacques LeGoff's *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge* (1) and the entrepreneurial spirit of the Parisian intellectual

scene, Wei goes well beyond LeGoff in fleshing out this picture. The thirst for fame and the competition to attract large numbers of students, who helped secure a master's reputation as well as his income, was a distinguishing feature of Parisian intellectual life, especially in the first half of the 12th century.

The second chapter is on the monastic writers and the emergence of the School of St. Victor. I find the way in which Wei lets individual authors (Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, Hildegard of Bingen, and Hugh of St. Victor) speak directly to the reader through long quotations in English to be particularly useful and successful. While Wei shows his command of the principal and most recent secondary literature on this topic – equally demonstrated in subsequent chapters – his choice of texts and arguments provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of this topic than is normally available. The chapter would have benefited from another example that highlights an important difference between those in religious orders and schoolmen. Against Abelard's view of the nature of God and the perfection of creation, which did not allow for God's creating a different world, Hugh of St. Victor maintained that God could have acted otherwise than he did, and thus the order of creation was chosen by God out of other possibilities. Peter Lombard in his *Libri sententiarum* shared Hugh's concern and also criticized Abelard on the same issue, and this particular issue continued into the 13th and 14th centuries.

With chapter three Wei comes to the origins and early development of the University of Paris. This chapter covers the necessary account of the emergence of universities (particularly Bologna and Paris) in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Like the rest of the book, it is well written and clear. He takes the reader through a close reading of the 1215 statutes for the University of Paris as well as the papal bull *Parens Scientiarum*, both of them major documents for the early decades of that university. This is the best textual analysis of *Parens Scientiarum* I have read. And largely because of that analysis Wei is able to put the early organization of the University of Paris into the narrative of the monastic critique of the schools in the 12th century and to see the university, in part, as a blending of those traditions. This is a perceptive departure from earlier accounts. I also welcome Wei's emphasis on the federal structure of the university, emphasizing the independent but, for the most part, collaborative nature of the nations within the faculty of arts and higher faculties of theology, canon law, and medicine. Wei's use of Bonaventure and Aquinas to illustrate two different dimensions of 13th century theology – a not unusual choice – works well.

Chapter four is entitled 'Communication and control'. Wei makes a strong case for the importance of moral theology as the principal concern of theologians in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, and that throughout this period into the late 13th century theologians justified their discipline, writing, and teaching as crucial to the proper structure of the lives of Christians outside the schools, as seen in the views of Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent and Godfrey of Fontaines. This applicability to societal concerns is illustrated by excellent examples of specific topics and issues, most especially the concept of purgatory, as explored by 12th- and 13th-century theologians, going back to Abelard, Hugh of St. Victor and Peter Lombard, the transitional generation of Peter Comestor, Peter the Chanter and William of Auvergne, up to Aquinas, and Bonaventure. Other topics explored are the ethics of intention (based on Abelard, but later referred to again in one of the only two mentions of John Duns Scotus) and depictions of the devil. A third section on means of communication covers quodlibetal disputations, preaching, confession, and different approaches based on the specific audiences being targeted, though surprisingly no use was made in this chapter of Sophie Menache's *The Vox Dei. Communication in the Middle Ages*.[\(2\)](#)

Chapter five is on sex and marriage, the first significant exploration of this topic beyond the scholarly contributions of James Brundage and Pierre Payer. The notion of male superiority in gender relationships is nicely balanced with examples of discussions of marital affection and equality. The chapter provides a good exploration of these issues using statements from theologians of the period, indeed less studied ones, which adds important new material. Wei's evidence forms a needed corrective to the view that medieval theologians were simply 'rabid misogynists'. Although Wei does not explore to any extent how celibate theologians could intelligently discuss sex and marriage with which they purportedly had no direct experience, one sometimes forgets that unlike monastic writers, most of whom had been in a cloistered, all-male environment from an early age, scholastic theologians, including mendicants, grew up in a family and

as priests learned a great deal from hearing confessions.

The last thematic chapter, chapter six, is on money. This chapter creates a good counterbalance to the views of Jacques LeGoff and Stephen Ferruolo that masters viewed themselves as similar to artisans and merchants by noting that they saw themselves much more as separate from and superior to those groups. Wei makes good use of Joel Kaye's recent work, *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century. Money, Market Exchange, and the Emergence of Scientific Thought*.⁽³⁾ Wei makes an interesting observation on the 12th-century neglect by theologians of economic issues, including usury, while theologians in the early 13th century confronted it directly (a shift in the understanding of what concerned them or what they thought they needed to address). Wei has made an excellent choice of issues (traditional views and their re-conceptualization; concepts of credit, contracts, money, and time), using quotations from individual theologians (specifically Aquinas and other 13th-century theologians), and I applaud his choice of an under-explored topic, annuities, to illustrate these changes.

Where I have questions regarding Wei's structure and analysis is in his decision as to how to conclude his study in his final chapter on 'anti-intellectual intellectuals'. Wei is certainly correct in stressing the growing use of the vernacular, as illustrated by Jean de Meun, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart and should be applauded for bringing them into the same picture frame as masters in the arts and theological faculties at the University of Paris. Moreover, the explosion of mystical writings in the 14th century is certainly an important phenomenon in the late Middle Ages. My objection has to do with balance, with how the end of the story is presented, and what message is being disseminated to a non-specialist audience. I don't find convincing the view that a growing interest in mystical union undercut the theological enterprise or the emphasis on pastoral mission, or destroyed the self-conceptions of theologians speaking to the needs and issues of society outside the university. While there may have been fewer theological discussions of issues connected with pastoral mission and devotional practices, those concerns did remain in quodlibetal disputations, where one also finds an increase in topics of political and ecclesiological importance. And it is highly questionable that the reputation of the University of Paris and its theologians declined at the end of the 13th century. If anything, the attempt by the French monarchy to harness that reputation on behalf of royal policies, the largely successful program of the Avignon papacy to remain the major patron of university scholars, and the important role played by university theologians at the time of the Papal Schism point in the opposite direction.

In this last chapter Wei has abandoned his balanced use of sources and voices admirably chosen to illustrate his points in earlier chapters. He has, instead, based a supposed shift on the status and interests of Parisian theologians on the voices of three persons, only one of whom was a scholastically trained theologian, and even he not in the mainstream of university theology of the period. Theologians themselves were not casting doubt on their own authority or the importance of what they did. Quite the contrary! Wei is suddenly ignoring the voices of major scholastic theologians of the period (1280–1320), e.g. Henry of Ghent, Godfrey of Fontaines, Giles of Rome, John Duns Scotus, or Peter Auriol, not to mention a large number of less well-known theologians whose writings were important in their own day. I also disagree that discussions of the ambiguity of language and multiple meanings that one finds among early 14th-century theologians, such as Henry of Harclay, Durand of St. Pourçain, Peter Auriol, and especially William of Ockham (admittedly an Oxford, not a Parisian theologian, but nevertheless influential at Paris), led to serious uncertainty of any knowledge of final truth. In fact, the stronger interest in grammar, language, and logic in early 14th-century thought parallels many of the interests of the early 12th century, and was used to provide a more solid foundation for theology, a more critical and, for them, a more accurate understanding of theological questions and biblical exegesis. The critiques of meaning and language that one finds among university theologians in the early 14th century play a very different role from the critiques of the three persons chosen by Wei to represent that period.

Instead of the refreshing new observations Wei has provided in earlier chapters, he has here reverted to a description that was standard in histories of medieval thought a generation ago. To treat the period 1300–30 as a movement away from the value of scholastic theology and the status of theologians by concentrating

attention on Jean de Meun, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart is equivalent to ending an account of the 12th century by concentrating on the parodies or critiques of the schools found in Goliardic verse or Walter of St. Victor's *Contra quatuor labyrinthos Franciae* and ignoring contemporary figures at Paris, such as Peter of Poitiers, Peter the Chanter, Stephen Langton, and Praepositinus of Cremona. Or, to use a more modern example, this would be like ending an account of the 19th century with William Morris and the Arts and Craft movement or Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, as if the Industrial Revolution led nowhere and the discoveries and inventions that transformed life in the 20th century never occurred. When choosing what path or development to highlight as a conclusion, it helps to have some idea of what happened afterwards and was even happening at the time.

Mystical thought is certainly an important element in the cultural and religious life of post-1270 Europe and a fascinating topic for many modern readers, but its impact on university life, intellectually or religiously, was limited. One could well argue that Paris entered a period of intellectual growth and expansion in the period from Henry of Ghent to Durand of St. Pourçain and Peter Auriol, and, by way of his writings, William of Ockham. For a time the achievements of this latter group all but eclipsed the contribution of the so-called great age of scholasticism, with the exception of Thomas Aquinas, who continued to be cited frequently. Save for the interests of many modern medievalists, Eckhart's contribution pales alongside the achievements of his immediate contemporaries at Paris, such as Scotus and Durand of St. Pourçain, not to mention later figures, such as Francis of Marchia, Nicholas of Autrecourt, Nicole Oresme, Pierre d'Ailly, and Jean Gerson. And the impact of the University of Paris as a major institution in France and Western Europe was probably greater in the 14th century, socially, ecclesiastically, and politically, than at any point in the 13th century. Wei's final chapter ignores the demographic growth of the University of Paris in the 14th century, stimulated by Boniface VIII's constitution *Cum ex eo* in 1298 that expanded the use of parish revenues for university study, and the increase of benefices to scholars as a result of the papal innovation of allowing universities, beginning with Paris, to supplicate the pope on behalf of masters.

Admittedly Wei, like any other historian, has to end his story somewhere, and the period of French intellectual and university life he is most knowledgeable about is the 12th and 13th centuries. But it is unfair to the less informed reader to present an unbalanced picture of the early 14th century and to reintroduce a narrative of the development of 'intellectual culture in medieval Paris' that has undergone significant revision in the last two generations of scholarship.

That said, Wei's book is, without question, a major contribution to the intellectual history of the 12th and 13th centuries. It is full of new and exciting observations, engagingly written, in a way that will be accessible to an interested general reader as well as specialists.

Notes

1. Jacques LeGoff, *Les intellectuels au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1957, repr. 1985, transl. as *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993)).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sophie Menache, *The Vox Dei. Communication in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1990).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Joel Kaye, *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century. Money, Market Exchange, and the Emergence of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge, 1998).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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