

## The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Christianity

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Reviewing this book is a challenge. The 'handbook' genre falls somewhere between that of an encyclopedia and that of the textbook but without the overall coverage, both of topics and details, of the former nor the communications-driven 'narrative arc' of the latter. What we have here is a collection of 31 essays – each a worthy piece of scholarship – on different aspects of medieval religious history which are brought together by a structure that tries to unite aspects of the topic while been loose enough to cope with the diversity of 'medieval Christianity' (a portmanteau term at best) over a 1000-year timespan. So this review will focus first on this linking structure and then look in more detail at two essays taken as a sample of the work.

The handbook's first part is labeled 'methods' and four essays outline various perspectives on the writing of history where it overlaps with religions. The most significant essay in the entire collection is that of the editor entitled 'Histories and historiographies' where he offers a perspective on the revolution in the study of medieval religion that took place over the 20th century by which the fixed concerns of 'church history,' 'history of ideas,' or studies of 'popular piety' disappeared to be replaced – from the initiatives of the *Annales* historians – with 'lived religion' and the far more all-embracing discipline of medieval history we know today. The rest of the volume, explicitly in the case of some of the authors, can be seen as an example of this approach.

The second part is labeled 'spaces' and examines both Christianity as a 'world religion' by looking at notions of Christendom and at Christianity's more local impact: monasteries, civic religion, and more localized religious structures. While each essay undoubtedly adds to the book as a whole, as a distinct section it does not work well. The essays of A. G. Remensnyder and S. Bagge do fit within the section's agenda, while those of Wendy Davies on monasticism, Nicholas Terpstra on civic religion, and that of K. L. French on local and domestic religion strain the structure to a point where one wonders why it is there. All these essays could have simply been entitled 'Medieval religion and ...' but this would probably have made the whole look too like an encyclopedia. But as a handbook, it does not leave this reader, at any rate, with a sense of being shown over the range of those essays a distinct and significant aspect of 'medieval Christianity.'

The third and fourth parts, practices and ideas, when taken together form the core of this book and range

form rituals (pilgrimage and the Eucharist) to the issues of faith and doubt. The historical perspective of the whole book is also in evidence in that these are essays on how people in the past understood their situation and imagined it ideologically; and even when concerned with aspects of medieval religion where their theological speculation was abundant, these essays never veer off to become a history of the ideas as such. Many will welcome this because for too long histories of theology have done duty for the history of how people understood the religious dimension of their lives. On the other hand, theology, the formal discipline, was a manifestation of medieval Christianity; and as such it surely merited a chapter devoted to it, its complex relationships to its sources, and its academic manifestations in academic forms – such as the disputation – and structures – such as universities.

The fifth section, identities, looks at four fairly distinct topics: monasticisms (note the plural) by Constance Berman, mysticism and the body, other religions, and non-conformity. As with the section called ‘spaces,’ these are valuable essays, but how they link together is not that clear. Indeed, Wendy Davies’s paper would have been better located just before that of Berman (and perhaps the same could be said of all the essays in the ‘spaces’ section). The final essays in this section (Sara Lipton on Christians’ attitudes to non-Christians and G. G. Merlo’s essay on Christians and non-conforming Christians) form a well-conceived small unit in the book and must do duty for an essay on reactions to ‘heresy.’ But too much has been attempted in too short a compass. Lipton’s essay fails to do justice to the complexities with regard to both Christians and Jews and to Christians and Muslims – and it could not be otherwise. What was really needed was a section on ‘Christianity and otherness’ – to which much of Lipton’s essay could serve as a general introduction. Then a set of more specific studies on Judaism, Islam, and the other religions that Christians found around them and within their own imaginations, non-conformism, reform movements, and ‘heresy’.

The book’s final part, ‘power’, is a set of five essays and a conclusion which look at many of the more familiar themes of ‘church history’: papal authority, religion and kingship, the influence of Christianity on notions of political power. While it is noteworthy that many of the essays use medieval canon law as a significant historical force, it is disappointing that there was not a section devoted explicitly to the theme – such a chapter could have acted as a support to many of the book’s essays. The nearest we get to such a chapter is the essay by Sarah Hamilton but it addresses the topic at best incidentally.

I now want to focus on just two essays – selected at random using a *sors virgilianae* – which, I hope, will show the strengths and weaknesses of the book. I write this section with trepidation as one can see at every point that the authors were trying to do justice to their brief while at the same time producing a meaningful piece of research. The first is the essay by Eric Palazzo on eucharistic rituals. This begins with a most useful introduction to the centrality of ‘the Mass’ for medieval churchmen – it is not so clear that it was at the centre of lay Christianity – and a very helpful note on the state of scholarship which notes the key, but complex, role of the work of Josef Jungmann. This work is critically situated as being focused on the liturgy, as if it were a golden age, of *Ordo Romanus I* (690–700). But while this introduction to Jungmann, and a few others, is useful, we are not given an overview of the state of history of research in liturgy nor a background in the use of liturgical evidence as an historical source. Then follows a short mini-essay on the interplay of liturgical practice and theology going into great detail on the issue of portable altars – this is a topic on which Palazzo is an expert, but one wonders about its appropriateness in a handbook? Then follows two more, almost distinct, mini essays: one (pp. 243–6) on the liturgy and the senses which is really a preliminary to a medieval notion of ‘sacrament’ – but this aspect is not explored in a manner that would be accessible to someone not familiar with the debates; and then another mini-essay on the liturgical book – another area where Palazzo is the expert – as an object in the semiotic reality of ritual. It is all excellent material in the abstract, but it does not work as a single piece of writing and that piece then does not really function well within the book. One small point: Palazzo’s piece is translated and there are two blunders: Decentius was bishop of Gubbio, whereas the form here ‘Decentius de Gubbio’ (p. 241) looks like an appellation, and ‘the spoken phase of the liturgy’ is known in English as ‘the ministry of / liturgy of the Word’ and ‘Parole’ (p. 241) is never used as a technical term. The second piece I let the book fall open upon when selecting an essay for comment was that of Sarah Hamilton: ‘Bishops, education, and discipline’ (pp. 531–49). This essay examines the role of the church’s coercive functions – penance, canonical sanctions,

and the use of ‘the secular arm’ – and how it was linked with desires for a better educated clergy, who would make the church’s demands clearer to those they were there to serve, and, lastly, how this related to how ‘lay Christians internalize[d] Christian teachings and [the] role [...] ecclesiastical discipline play[ed] in this process’ (p. 541). The essay itself is fascinating in that it points out the afterlife of canonical penance (following on from Meens’ essay) in the growth of canon law collections, how these in turn have to be viewed from the perspective of the agenda of bishops, and how the applications of various forms of discipline varied in the later Middle Ages. The essay touches on many issues, avoids others almost entirely such as the formalization of canon law and the appearance of the ‘sacrament of penance,’ and leaves the reader with sketchy grasp of several interweaving strands of change. The article tried to cover too many topics while presenting its evidence as if it could form a coherent narrative. Both of these more detailed reviews are, however, to a certain extent unjust: it is not the individuals that are at fault but the handbook format: the topic of ‘medieval Christianity’ is just too broad and diffuse for such a treatment and the resulting briefs to the editor and writers seem to have asked for more coverage than is possible.

As a useful, if inherently flawed, introduction to a vast field of research, this book is to be welcomed; and most of the essays are, individually, excellent in content. It would have been better to divide the period into two: an early medieval volume whose time range ended around 1200 (using the reign of Innocent III and the foundation of the University of Paris as the dividing events), and another volume that ran from around 1200 until the Reformation. Perhaps such volumes will follow! One final point of praise: virtually every essay not only seeks to locate its subject matter against the current scholarly consensus, but also to locate that consensus within the evolution of scholarship in the latter half of the 20th century. Thereby, this book allows readers to approach other works with a contextual awareness of what they are reading.

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