

## Medieval Religion and its Anxieties: History and Mystery in the Other Middle Ages

**Review Number:** 2211

**Publish date:** Thursday, 11 January, 2018

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**ISBN:** 978-1-137-57077-2

**Date of Publication:** 2017

**Price:** £66.99

**Pages:** 300pp.

**Publisher:** Palgrave Macmillan

**Publisher url:** <http://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9781137570772>

**Place of Publication:** New York

**Reviewer:** Kieran Creedon

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*, the phrase 'ignotum per ignocius' is used in connection with the so-called 'sliding science' at which the would-be alchemists of the tale labour so diligently.<sup>(1)</sup> The phrase means to explain the unknown by the more unknown. The dubious clerics that populate the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* could easily find a space – a liminal one necessarily - in Professor Thomas A. Fudgé's thought-provoking book *Medieval Religion and its Anxieties: History and Mystery in the Other Middle Ages*. Like some of the historical figures that populate Fudgé's book, Chaucer's alchemists existed on the fringes of 14th-century society, hedge-dwellers and city-lurkers, inhabiting what Fudgé terms the *other* Middle Ages. It is this 'otherness' which his book addresses in wide-ranging and riveting detail, full of erudition and replete with supporting cast and historical anecdotes that would fit easily within Chaucer's canon.

Fudge's book comprises a preface and ten chapters, each of which shines a light into the gloomy inner-space of a particular aspect of the medieval mentality, as well as the external (mainly religious and theological) structures that prescribed medieval society and impacted upon its formation and anxieties. It is, in essence, a collection of essays with its unifying theme being the revelation of the 'other' as it focusses on these anxieties including, for example, eschatological terror, belief in the supernatural and the manner in which organised religion responded to these, and often played matters to its own advantage. The specialist historian will find much of interest here but Fudge's book also recommends itself to a lay audience, particularly because it provides a counter narrative to that generally deployed in relation to the Middle Ages, which traditionally 'has been dominated by popes, kings, monastic figures, theologians, knights and nobility' (p. 7). To these types, Fudge adds jurists, heretics, criminal animals, gargoyles (who, he says, 'have been almost entirely ignored by art historians and are absent in a meaningful sense from all major studies on medieval sculpture' (p. 91), demons, theologians, deviants. Fudge provides ample historical evidence for his investigations but, crucially, also provokes the reader into wanting to delve further. A key strength of his approach is that he is never less than questioning in his exposition; he wants to know, literally in most cases, *cui bono*? (see, for example, the chapters in relation to Gilles de Rais and the Pikart sect of medieval Bohemia). What drives the *primum mobile* of historical events and when the victors have written their accounts, what are we to take as fact?

The anxieties of religion in these *other* Middle Ages are located in the fear of apocalypse, damnation, hell and what is known (or unknown) about the suffering of sinners in the afterlife. Fudge traces the evolution of 'eschatological expectation' through classical and early Christian sources up to representations of the Last Judgement in Taddeo di Bartolo and Michelangelo (as well as the representations of hell by Hieronymus Bosch) and concludes that "'Last Judgements" reflect ideas promoted by theologians and provide glimpses into the conceptual world of the Latin West illuminating the dark pathways of human anxiety so vividly on the *other* Middle Ages' (p. 146) while elucidating how such imagery fixed itself onto the medieval mindset. Elsewhere he tells us that the 'terrors of hell predominated, creating (and reflecting) considerable anxiety' (p. 120). In a chapter on 'The Feast of the Ass' he writes that 'later medieval Europe was an age characterised by fear, uncertainty, apocalyptic angst, and visions of calamity' (p. 8), and, given the 'Rabelaisian' subject matter, it is impossible not to think of Bakhtin who said: 'It was the victory of laughter over fear that most impressed medieval man'.<sup>(2)</sup> With reference to the work of Professor Bernard McGinn, Fudge finds 'some merit to the observation that only when people ceased to take an eschatological world view seriously were the Middle Ages at an end' (p. 244).

It is against this backdrop that Fudge introduces the *other* Middle Ages and it should be noted that, while each chapter generally covers a distinct area, there is significant 'interlacement' both topically and thematically between the chapters – for example, the story of the legal trial of a pig in chapter two, who, being condemned to execution, was 'formally dressed in jacket, breeches, and gloves' (p. 18), in what amounts to almost a parody of a parody that harks back to the Feast of the Ass in chapter one; or, to take another example, the foreshadowing in chapter two of the legal meaning of sodomy which will feature again in chapter three in relation to the crimes of Gilles de Rais, or in chapters seven and eight concerning Bohemian heresy, where it is noted that the allegation of such activity became the norm in heresy trials.

The preface announces Fudge's agenda as he declares that 'this book reflects my idiosyncratic approach to university teaching', invoking the memory of Sir Richard Southern who said 'we learn after all by being puzzled and excited, not by being told' (p. ix). The reader is then further familiarised with the concept of the *other* Middle Ages in chapter one ('The Feast of the Ass: medieval faith, fun, and fear') wherein Fudge discusses the medieval farce 'originally held on Christmas Day but later celebrated on 14th January' (p. 1) in honour of the donkey that delivered Mary and her infant son Jesus from Herod's infamous massacre of the innocents. The Feast is a topsy-turvy occasion wherein traditional societal roles are reversed and where churches are used for celebration of 'mock religious festivals' (p. 3) and Fudge puts things succinctly: 'Latin, liturgy, and learning contrast sharply with beer, brothers, and bowel movements. Or do they?' (p. 6). The question here is important, in some ways it exemplifies what the entire book is about. This opening

chapter is still prefatory in tone as Fudgé sets out his definition of the *other* Middle Ages stating that it ‘calls for the identification of the various outcasts, the despised, the hated, the contemptible, and the feared who made up the underside of society’ (p. 8).

Chapter two (‘Prosecuting animals as criminals in medieval Europe’) considers the judicial travails of various criminalised animals, but its underlying purpose is to expose the nature of humanity through the prism of legal procedures, on which the author is excellent. ‘From the thirteenth century, the bodies of civil and canon law became in some ways virtually indistinguishable. Canonists accepted the Justinian Code a supplementary source of canon law. The boundaries between canon and civil law remained largely permeable’ (p. 15). Fudgé is alerting the reader to what is to follow – not the trials of animals but those of humans for heresy. There is, nevertheless, some mirth in what follows, even as – or maybe because – Fudgé plays it straight; he discusses a 1522 case referring to it as ‘The People of Autun v City Rays’ prosecuted by eminent French jurist Bartholomé Chassenée, a bizarre case (but not unique) where the rats are charged with the ruination of local barley crops. As the legal proceedings get underway and the rats fail to make an appearance in the court they are in danger of being in contempt. In another case, from 1520, Hugo, Bishop of Besançon’s throne is so riddled with woodworm that on the one day of the year when he sits upon it, it collapses beneath him and he falls hitting his head on the altar steps. Clearly, the woodworm must be prosecuted, with Chassenée representing the defendants (p. 17). There are multiple other examples and Fudgé’s use of sources in terms of *modus procedendi* is impressive, likewise the way in which he stitches together this bizarre tapestry. We learn that ‘when animals could not or would not appear for trial, they were tried *in absentia*’ (p. 26). Even though it seems farcical to ‘modern’ readers, Fudgé is showing us how such a mentality could have existed. Part of the subtlety of his intent is to nudge us towards the question of those religious anxieties when they occur, for example, in the case of Jews, Muslims, heretics. It might be noted that this chapter concludes by telling us that in 2008 a bear was found guilty of stealing honey in a town in Macedonia and that the bear ‘remains a fugitive from justice at large in an undisclosed location’ (p. 39).<sup>(3)</sup>

Chapter three (‘Piety, perversion, and serial killing: the strange case of Gilles de Rais’) is a *tour de force* of historical writing, blending narrative with analysis. Gilles is perhaps best known as the model for Charles Perrault’s Bluebeard, the subject of a book about his trial by Georges Bataille (which Fudgé draws upon) as well as a central figure in J.-K. Huysmans’ novel *Là-bas*. Fudgé’s foreshadowing is immediately made evident: ‘If the criminal prosecution of animals figures in the *other* Middle Ages, there are equally disturbing juridical proceedings involving people underscoring social anxiety’ (p. 51). The story of Gilles de Rais is one of infamy; he is, perhaps, one of the better known characters on display here, ‘comrade-in-arms to Joan of Arc’ (p. 53), but Fudgé is more concerned with the portrait that emerges from the historical past, the picture that emerges from folk memory, historical sources, legal documents which position Gilles de Rais ‘rather firmly in the shadows of the *other* Middle Ages and consign him to a type of perpetual infamy’ (p. 53). Fudgé tells how a quarrel over property had unforeseen consequences for the wealthy and outwardly pious Gilles and how the ‘idea, expounded in canon law, that arrest on charges of heresy also implied seizure of property had significant ramifications for Gilles and tremendous advantage for his enemies’ (p. 55). Like all the chapters in this volume, the author’s abundant research is lightly worn throughout the narrative but firmly underpins the whole enterprise, attesting to a careful close reading of the sources as he forensically analyses the trial of Gilles de Rais, and others, on charges of the murder of children and sexual depravity. Controversially to some perhaps, Fudgé asks whether it was all a stitch-up. Was the trial of Gilles and others a travesty of justice, or worse, was there a conspiracy, a land grab? The author highlights the various elements that point in such direction and skilfully extracts the full value of story from the history within. It is a most useful addition to the English language works available on this subject.

Chapter four (‘Gargoyles and glimpses of forgotten worlds’) is an informed look at the exterior features of gothic churches and cathedrals drawing the reader’s attention to hunky punks, sheela-na-gigs, chimeras, grotesques and corbels and investigating the reason for the very existence of gargoyles, sometimes so sexually explicit in their holy places. We learn that ‘essentially no two gargoyles are alike’ and that ‘they are rarely found in isolation’ (p. 96) Fudgé tackles the problems and possibilities of their meaning and concludes that it is difficult to say anything with certainty concerning same (p. 98) and follows up with what many

might consider to be a brave statement from the pen of a medieval historian:

It may be a fallacy to assume that everything has particular meaning or significance and in vain does the historian strive to discover symbolic meaning hidden in every form of art that has come down from the Middle Ages. (p. 101)

In chapter five ('To hell with the theologians: doctrines of damnation in 'last judgements' in the medieval Latin West') Fudgé's art historian's eye looks at the fact that 'late medieval European mentalities developed an obsession with the end of the world' (p.120) and he links the imagery found in Last Judgement representations to popular consciousness and the formation of a significant power base – as a consequence of this fear of damnation, 'By the later Middle Ages, the power of theologians had grown to significant proportions' (p. 130).

There is a large amount of information contained within 300 pages of this volume and some of the other areas covered in terms of the 'strange landscape' (4) are included in chapters on 'Sensuality, spirituality, and sexuality in the religious experience of female mystics' as well as medieval Bohemian heresy. Regarding the latter, Fudgé deals specifically with various reports of the scandalous behaviour of the Pikart sect in chapter seven ('Demonizing dissenters: patterns of propaganda and persecution'). He considers that the Pikarts 'flourished before the rise of the witch hunts that convulsed Europe for more than 300 years, but the allegations and suspicions were not radically removed from that later history. Groups of other heretics were assimilated into that emerging matrix of godless association with the powers of darkness' (p. 192). (5) Again Fudgé explicitly asks '*cui bono?* Who benefits from the repression of the Adamite-Pikart sect in Bohemia?' (p. 146). The answer is that among the beneficiaries are the Roman church (needless to say) but also, and of more telling importance, another reformist faction, the Taborites. The existence of the Pikarts had become a problem, a 'lamentable thing' perhaps, and it was deemed necessary that they should be demonised and destroyed. Chapter eight ('The stripping and shaming of heretics') continues with the topic of heresy and, as the author explicitly acknowledges, chapters 7 and 8 are linked. Fudgé is an expert in the Hussite movement and as he moves about in the territory of the 'persecuting society', his firm grasp of his *métier* is obvious. In chapter eight, he deals with 'garments of shame' (p. 217) invoking not only Bohemia but also the fate of other heretics such as the Cathars or the Templar grandmaster Jacques de Molay and finds that: 'In all cases, heretics were humiliated by these types of clothing while ritual stripping and shaming was only increased by means of the public processional to the place of death' (p. 217). No such book would be complete without a look at medieval relics and chapter nine ('Surviving the Middle Ages: the extraordinary pursuit of salvation') covers this area as well as 'pilgrimage, ascetic practices that led to despising the body, mortifying the flesh, and embracing pain as a means of oneness with Christ' (p. 246).

The final chapter is entitled ‘The fickle hand of faith’ and serves as a kind of open-ended conclusion where Fudgé deploys an array of questions for further consideration as he rifles through various ‘what if’ scenarios from the starting position that ‘Medieval theologians sometimes spoke of divine providence in world events and daily life but perhaps time and chance happened without plan and fate intervened to change the course of history more often than not’ (p. 253). Chaucer is invoked, as is Boethius and the concept of *Rota fortunae*. Fudgé’s ‘what ifs?’ are counterfactual musings that serve to stimulate further discussion and study. What if Barbarossa had not fallen from his horse into a Turkish river? Or ‘what if the gate had not closed so suddenly behind Joan of Arc at Compiègne?’ (p. 254). Fudgé gleefully proposes each of these instances (and others), always with a wry eye on the wheel of fortune and its haphazard effects on the outcomes of history. The *other* Middle Ages, he concludes, after all, to be ‘in many ways not terribly different from the mainstream of medieval history’ (p. 260), notwithstanding what’s come before, we must not lose sight of the fact that the *other* Middle Ages, when all is said and done, are part of the Middle Ages *per se*; not mythical, but historic. This final chapter, again, posits many questions and concludes, with appropriate inevitability, that ‘the fickle hand of faith played an imprecise role in the shaping of the medieval centuries and in the determination of what I have elaborated as the *other* Middle Ages. What if the wheel of fortune had turned in different ways?’ (p. 264).

It would, of course, be possible to read each chapter out of sequence, and in this sense the book serves as a series of essays, a survey, a medieval miscellany; nevertheless reading it from beginning to end provides in itself a kind of model of the universe of the *other* Middle Ages – beginning with the lowly ass, moving to the trials of animals, circles of hell, torment of sinners, punishment of heretics, possibilities of salvation and ending, fittingly with the ultimate *unknown* – Fate.

Umberto Eco once wrote an essay entitled ‘Dreaming of the Middle Ages’ wherein he identified a taxonomy of ‘Ten Little Middle Ages’ which included, *inter alia*, ‘the Middle Ages as *pretext*, as *ironical revisitation*, as a *barbaric age*, the Middle Ages of *Decadentism*, of the *Millennium and the Apocalypse...*’.(6) Maybe Fudgé’s *other* Middle Ages can be added to this list or, in fact, maybe they already encompass Eco’s list; whatever the case, it can be said that Fudgé presents the reader with a canon of alterity, a *wunderkabinett* of medieval otherness, liminalities and borderlines and he is an adept guide at leading the reader through the labyrinths of these *other* Middle Ages, deploying his sources in a masterful way, as he ranges between between art historical, archival and legal. Fudgé revels in this subject matter and peers determinedly, voyeuristically into these other spaces (in a way reminiscent of the work of such scholars as Norman Cohn, R. I. Moore or Natalie Zemon Davis) and the reader comes away enriched.

The endnotes are meticulous and make excellent reading in themselves; placed as they are at the end of each chapter they do not interfere with the narrative flow but provide clear evidence of relevant and up-to-date scholarship in relation to the matters under discussion. They are also, occasionally, quite withering. There are 11 colour illustrations, vividly conveying some of the worst excesses of the *other* Middle Ages, from exhibitionist monks to the terrors of hell. One finishes this book wishing that there were more like it – it is a fascinating and valuable academic study from a writer that engages, energises and uses sources to put the very idea of the historical Middle Ages on trial. It is up to others to take up the cudgels but as they do they should heed some words of Professor Fudgé: ‘In sum, none of our sources can be trusted implicitly’ (p. 197).

Finally, a word for Palgrave Macmillan and the editors of the New Middle Ages series who continue to publish and advance scholarship of such high quality.

## Notes

1. *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologue and Tale* is unusual in that it has no known major sources or analogues. See essay by Carolyn P. Colette and Vincent DiMarco in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, Volume II*, general editor Robert M. Correale, (Cambridge, 2005) p. 716.[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, (Bloomington, IN, 1984), p. 90.  
[Back to \(2\)](#)
  3. There was a 1993 movie entitled *The Hour of the Pig* (released in the US with the title *The Advocate*) and was loosely based on the career of Bartholomé Chassenée.[Back to \(3\)](#)
  4. I borrow the term from Christopher Frayling. See *Strange Landscape: A Journey Through the Middle Ages* (London, 1996).[Back to \(4\)](#)
  5. Well worth a read in this area is Fudge's 'Traditions and trajectories in the historiography of European witch hunting', *History Compass*, 4, 3 (May 2006), 488–527.[Back to \(5\)](#)
  6. Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver, (London, 1995), pp. 68–72.[Back to \(6\)](#)
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