



Constance H. Berman. *Medieval Religion: New Approaches (Re-Writing Histories)*. New York: Routledge, 2005. xxiii + 422 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-31686-6; \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-31687-3.

Dawn Marie Hayes. *Body and Sacred Place in Medieval Europe, 1100-1389*. New York: Routledge, 2003. 208 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-98838-4.

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The Future of Medieval Church History?

The noted historian of medieval religious culture John van Engen recently concluded a lucid thirty-page “think-piece” entitled “The Future of Medieval Church History” with a challenging plea: “We must frame our subject,” he wrote, “openly and invitingly, in all the fullness of its cultures and contingencies.”[1] The two books reviewed here are published by Routledge as parts of series that valiantly attempt to do just that.

Constance Hoffman Berman’s book, *Medieval Religion: New Approaches* (2005), is published as part of Routledge’s “Rewriting Histories” series which aims to make revisionist history more broadly available to students. The volume gathers fifteen previously published articles and extracts from books by major contemporary scholars, and organizes the collection into four parts, each with a significant editorial introduction. The articles in part I, “Religious Speculation and Social Thought,” are intended to illustrate “how Christians of the central Middle Ages thought about themselves within specific institutions, often creating new ones to accommodate changing self-images” (p. 5). The second part, “Reform and Growth in the Clerical Hierarchy,” presents essays departing from “traditional narratives of developments within the institutional church” (p. 5). Part III, entitled “Women and the Practice of Asceticism and Contemplation,” commences with Berman’s own ground-breaking re-examination of the evidence for early history of women’s communities in the Cistercian order and re-prints a selection of studies that re-examine the nature of encounters between male and female religious in the context of monastic reform movements. Finally, “Increasing Violence and Exclusion,” turns to the development of doctrinal positions and practices in the Western Church with respect to the treatment of Muslims and Jews.

The four parts contain the work of a diverse range

of noteworthy and representative medieval historians whose broader work has, in various ways, exerted an important influence on the field of contemporary medieval history.[2] Helpfully, Berman not only introduces each section of the book, but provides a brief introductory comment to each article or extract which includes a précis of the argument of the work, and also serves to situate the selection within the author’s wider opus. These editorial comments are, perhaps, the best feature of the collection, providing the “target-audience,” namely students, with some framework with which to interpret contemporary medieval historical scholarship. This is indeed an “open and inviting” strategy for students who often struggle to gain some perspective on scholarly debates, and to temper the allure of the “new” interpretation with a broader understanding of historiographical directions.

It is, however, precisely the rubric of the “new” that is problematic in this collection. While a purely chronological understanding of new as “recent” is perhaps not the only meaning intended by the editor, one cannot help being somewhat surprised that the first three articles of a book subtitled “New Approaches” date from 1977, 1980 and 1995. Indeed, only two of the fifteen articles in the collection were originally published in or after the year 2000. Of course, the age of work does not belie its worth. However, to qualify as “new” articles written before the birth of many of the target-audience does beg the question of the valency and the purpose of the adjective.

Certainly, Berman intends by “new” not simply recent works, but those studies which evince a break with past scholarship. In her general introduction, Berman sketches a rather value-laden picture of the evolution of the study medieval religion. Whereas, she writes, “standard historiography” emphasized the development

of mendicant orders as “the triumph of the Church”, “recent study” sees the twelfth or even the eleventh century as “the central period of interest because of its innovations” (this, not surprisingly, is Berman’s own area), and “newest work” “expands the boundaries of the study of medieval religion” to examine “understudied groups,” “participation in religious groups” and “the consequences of administrative structures, theology, and canon law on the interaction between insiders and outsiders” (p. 2). According to Berman, what is new about the “newest work” is 1) who is doing it (they are not “religious”); 2) that such studies cross departmental barriers and challenge standard periodizations; 3) that they “draw on new archival research,” and 4) go “outside established document collections” (p. 2).

There are a number of assumptions at work here. While few would contest that there is now a greater proportion of lay people and of people who hold no religious confession at all writing about medieval religion, to what extent the presence or absence of a religious conviction and background helps or hinders the religious historian’s work is at least a question worth asking. Berman’s rather sweeping statements that until recently “the history of religious orders remained written only by modern monks (and an occasional nun) usually lacking training as historians” and that “theology in particular was a Catholic monopoly held by papally appointed commissions of scholars who edited by committee the definitive works of Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians” (p. 2) are not only misleading, but have the unfortunate ring of precisely that sort of *a priori* partisan disparagement which she rightly derides.

Secondly, while it is true that interdisciplinarity is an exciting direction in contemporary scholarship on medieval religion (see, *inter alia*, the work of Celia Chazelle or Jeffrey Hamburger), for all of the indisputable worth of the individual articles in this collection, I see little evidence of this direction here. With the exception of the extract from Bruzelius’s work on Clarissan architecture, and the 1977 Caroline Bynum article on “Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother” this is a fairly straight forward collection of historical essays, with nary a glance over the departmental parapet to other fields and methodologies such as liturgy, theology, music, art, codicology or archaeology, either within individual articles, or in the selection as a whole.

Thirdly, notwithstanding the quality of the contributions of the leading scholars in Part IV concerning aspects of the Western Church’s reactions to Jews and Muslims, what is not selected here, and what is wanting,

are the voices of the outsiders themselves. The tremendous growth in scholarship of medieval Eastern Christianities, of medieval Judaism and Islam, of the persistence of pre-Christian beliefs and practices is entirely without representation. Disappointingly, the collection thereby implies in fact that the study of “Medieval Religion” amounts in fact to little more than historians’ analysis of socio-political relationships in mainline Western Christianity of the Central Middle Ages. To reflect on van Engen’s plea, the door may be open, but to what?

Lastly, a practical concern. Given the stated target-audience for the series, one wonders about the need for the publication of a collection of previously published articles and extracts. Not only will nearly every professor want to augment the collection, but students routinely access such materials online or through electronic reserve systems through their libraries. Perhaps a more valuable undertaking would be to provide a translated collection of contemporary foreign-language scholarship on the topic. That would constitute an “open” and “inviting” tool for Anglophone students who are all too rarely aware of contemporary scholarship in the non-English speaking world.

Dawn Marie Hayes’s book, published as part of Routledge’s “Studies in Medieval History and Culture” series designed to provide an “outlet for monographs by scholars in the early stages of their careers” (p. vii), proposes to explore “dynamic exchanges between human bodies and sacred places in the central Middle Ages” (p. xix) and to establish “the mutually supportive exchanges between body and sacred place as well as to reveal the tension between the medieval theory and practice of sacred place” (p. xxii). The brief monograph is divided into two parts, each of two chapters. Part I concerns what Hayes terms “documents of theory.” The first chapter treats the development of conceptions of sacred place in the biblical tradition and medieval Western liturgies of church consecration, the second chapter takes the example Notre-Dame de Chartres, to “examine how the local context of a church could distinguish a sacred place from numerous others” (p. 25). Here Hayes interprets the thirteenth-century collections of Marian miracle stories from Chartres as a kind of “portfolio for a clerical advertising campaign” intended to encourage pilgrimage (p. 33). In part II, Hayes turns to “documents of practice,” posing the question of “just how sacred—or set apart—were medieval churches?” (p. 53). In the first chapter of this part, Hayes furnishes evidence (mostly, though by no means exclusively, from Chartres) of “earthly uses” of the church proper and its precincts for lodging and storage, for vending, legal proceedings, game-playing, and

for sexual activity. Chapter four takes the assassination of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 as a notorious example for “medieval attitudes toward bodies, in particular Thomas’s consecrated body, and how it negotiated Church authority and the sacred place of Canterbury Cathedral in twelfth-century England” (p. 71). In conclusion, the author summarizes the suggestions of the preceding chapters, before considering the compartmentalization of domestic space in the late Middle Ages, and drawing some connections between these developments and the Protestant Reformation. In an epilogue, Hayes reflects on “Body and Sacred Place in the Wake of September 11.”

The topic of the relationship between the human body and the physical space of the sacred edifice is rich, and is currently generating very fruitful scholarly consideration.[3] Hayes’s most valuable contribution to this discussion is perhaps her brief presentation of some evidence for non-liturgical activities licitly and illicitly performed in churches and in church cloisters. Evidence for the existence of sleeping quarters for numerous members of the Cathedral staff within the body of Chartres Cathedral is an interesting and useful corrective both to idealized medieval conceptions of church buildings, and to modern analyses of religious art and architecture. Scholars of medieval ecclesiology, liturgy, art and architecture are well served by the reminder that, as Hayes observes with respect to the crypt at Chartres which was used as a *locus sanctus forciium* for the sick, “although the church’s architecture and liturgy may have conjured visions of heaven, the reality inside the building often resembled hell as visitors were overcome by screams of pain, the sight of rotting flesh, and offensive smells” (p. 56).

It is unfortunate that the monograph is seriously blighted by errors and distracting *non sequiturs*. On more than one occasion the long-s’s in old printed editions of Latin texts are repeatedly mistranscribed as f’s producing nonsensical quotations such as this ludicrous mis-transcription from synod documents from 1289 printed in Mansi: “*Item, prohibemus ne in ecclesia confecrata fanguinis violenti aut humani feminis effusione polluta*” (p. 157, n. 78).[4] Perhaps these rather alarmingly egregious errors may be attributed to less than careful editing, and this suspicion would seem to be borne out by the fact that the running title on final page of the epilogue (p. 103) remains printed as “Chapter Title.” Evidently, somehow someone neglected to type the title of Hayes’s epilogue in the allotted space!

More seriously distracting, however, is the author’s habit of including information that is tangential at best to

her argument not only in her lengthy endnotes, but in the body of the text. A few examples will illustrate this. After making a reference to the manuscripts containing the *Miracles of Notre-Dame de Chartres* (complete with non-standard shelf mark descriptions: e.g.: “MS Regina 339 in the Vatican Library”), the author begins a new paragraph *within the endnote* to disquisition on the destruction of the library at Chartres during World War II, even furnishing an anecdote which describes her meeting an elderly inhabitant of Chartres who “still remembers the day he saw pieces of burning paper drifting through the sky” (p. 124, endnote 6). Elsewhere, while noting the Virgin Mary’s title as mediatrix “by the twelfth-century” (p. 33)—surely also well before then!—the author provides a half-page endnote (p. 130 n. 60) describing the late *twentieth-century* movement in favour of the official proclamation of the Virgin Mary as Co-Redemptrix. She then includes a lengthy quotation from a website of “Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici” in support of this cause and she thanks her husband for the reference. The sole reason for the inclusion of these and many other lengthy bits of information in the endnotes seems to be that the author happens to find them incidentally interesting.

Within the body of the book itself, when discussing the use of Chartres’ chief relic, the *sancta camissa* (which is never actually fully described), the author draws a rather elaborate comparison between veneration for the relic and interest in the auction of some of Muhammed Ali’s personal effects in 1997. She begins the paragraph with the bald statement that “medieval people are not alone in their quest for objects that have touched special people” (p. 35), she next briefly describes the auction at Christies, and then concludes: “It is good to see that medieval justification for the power of the tunic of the Virgin is alive and well among modern collectors!” (p. 36). It is unusual to find this sort of material in professional academic publications.

Indeed, throughout the work Hayes exhibits a rather uninhibited tendency to make bold and generalizing claims which she follows with a selection of anecdotal evidence which may or may not be related geographically or temporally, and which seems to be adduced more according to loose association than according to what might ordinarily be considered reasoned argument. One final example will have to suffice as emblematic of a general practice. In chapter 2, where Hayes treats the thirteenth-century *Miracles of Our Lady of Chartres* to illustrate her thesis that at Chartres “power was founded on and mediated by worldly and human flesh” (p. 25), the author notes that many of the stories in the collection invoke images of breasts (p. 37). Rather than cite directly a

story involving breasts, and work through any proposed connection between this and “sacred place,” the author proceeds on p. 37 to cite the story of one Benoît who violated St Agatha’s feast day by working, and whose hand was burnt. Hayes notes with some enthusiasm and without further reference to the miracle collection that 1) it so happens that St Agatha was martyred by having her breasts cut off; 2) “it is significant that she is singled out in this miracle since her iconographic symbol is a dish with breasts”; 3) “the breasts were sometimes mistaken for loaves of bread,” which 4) is “particularly intriguing given that Chartres grew literally and figuratively from the wheat fields of the Beauce.” Hayes adds 5) that the Virgin Mary’s body was associated with bread by other medieval authors. The *coup de grâce* of this train of thought is finally illustrated by plates 4 and 5, two rather poor reproductions of paintings of Saint Agatha: one fifteenth-century French painting, and the other by the Renaissance Lombard painter Bernadino Luini (c.1480 - 1532), a contemporary of Raphael! The reader almost has forgotten that one was talking about Marian devotion in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Chartres, let alone *Body and Sacred Place!* This sort of almost allegorical associative interpretation cannot do the work of a close and critical examination of the text of collection (which is sorely wanting in the monograph), any more than suggestion amounts to demonstration.

It is unfortunate that the treatment of such an interesting and important topic, such an “inviting” title, can

be so seriously obscured and impeded.

Notes

[1]. John van Engen, “The Future of Medieval Church History,” *Church History* 71 (2002): 492-522 at p. 522.

[2]. For the full list of contents, consult the Library of Congress website: <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0420/2004015899.htm>

[3]. See most recently Dominique Iogna-Prat’s important *La maison Dieu: Une histoire monumentale de l’Église au Moyen Âge*, Paris: Seuil, 2006) and Iogna-Prat’s forthcoming chapter in the third volume of the *Cambridge History of Christianity*.

[4]. The text is from Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Venice: Zatta, 1780) vol. 24, col. 1020. See also p. 147 n. 52, where Hayes consistently makes the same error, mistranscribing f’s for s’s in her citation of an entry from a printed edition of the *Necrologium ecclesiae beatae Mariae carnolensis* (found in René Merlet & Alexandre Clerval, eds., *Un manuscrit chartrain du XIe siècle* (Chartres: Imprimerie Garnier, 1893) pp. 149-86). Compounding matters in the latter citation, not only is the printed quire number (21) incorrectly cited as the page number (instead of p. 149), but oddly the modern French editor’s own dating in French within parentheses: “...(après 1106)” is included seamlessly in Hayes’ quotation of the Latin necrology entry.

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