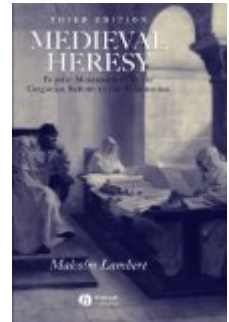


Malcolm Lambert. *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation.* Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. vi + 491 pp. \$98.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-631-22275-0.



Reviewed by John Cotts

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This third edition of the standard English-language introduction to medieval popular heresy endows an almost unmanageable bulk of material with a remarkable historiographical flexibility. Malcolm Lambert has retained much of the structure of the highly regarded second edition (1993), while incorporating recent research (in an impressive array of languages) and continuing to argue implicitly in favor of his ideas-based approach to the study of religious dissent. Readers familiar with the earlier editions will find no major changes; the chapter organization and methodology is unchanged, though the chapters on the Cathars and Lollards have been updated to reflect recent scholarship, as has the already impressive bibliography. That a third edition was considered necessary, barely a decade after the second, is testament to the vital scholarship that emerged, in a great many languages, during the 1990s.

No short review could do justice to the range and scope of Lambert's project, but a brief survey of the book's contents will help explain the author's assumptions and methods. In this regard

the volume's subtitle itself is not insignificant. From it we learn that for the author, as he says explicitly in his final chapter, "heresy and reform were twins"; that "popular heresy" is a meaningful term only for the central and later Middle Ages; and that this study is more concerned than much recent scholarship to explore parallels between medieval heretics and the Protestant reformers of the early-sixteenth century. After a programmatic introduction devoted primarily to pointing out divergences from his earlier editions, Lambert begins in a subtly polemical fashion by leading off with the burning of Orleans heretics in the early-eleventh century, an episode that has previously been thought to pertain more to local politics than real religious dissent. But for Lambert, "the first burning in the West was a burning of true heretics." This artfully constructed, episodic chapter explores Orleans and other instances of eleventh-century heretic burning and, with a remarkably light touch, makes a persuasive case that the period represents a serious revival of heretical popular piety. It is in this discussion that Lambert makes his clearest statement on recent historiographical trends, with R. I. Moore's theo-

ries in particular attracting both praise and revision.

The rest of the book follows a more-or-less standard chronological progression. The early-twelfth century saw the advent of independent orthodox and heterodox wandering preachers who set the stage for larger, more dangerous movements such as Catharism and Waldensianism, which in turn inspired an often successful ecclesiastical reaction marked above all by the development of inquisitorial procedures (which Lambert is comfortable calling "the inquisition"). The chapters dealing with the relationship between orthodox reform and heresy effectively rebut recent claims that heresy was invented by a church progressing inexorably towards system. Instead, Lambert's medieval church was caught off guard by religious enthusiasm and reacted in fits and starts. Borrowing R. W. Southern's notion of an "inflationary spiral" in which the unceasing growth of papal administration occasioned a concomitant loss of spiritual prestige, Lambert turns to the fourteenth century, focusing above all on Lollardy and the Hussites, before concluding with a consideration of the co-existence and assimilation of pre-existing heretical movements with early Protestant communities. Revisions to this new edition reflect Lambert's own recent work on the Cathars as well as a great deal of new scholarship on the Lollards. Engagement with recent theories about medieval history is, for the most part, implicit in Lambert's exhaustive footnotes.

The narrative is dense and exhaustively detailed, and will certainly be referenced more often than read. With the exception of the second chapter, with its clear response to differing views on the nature of eleventh-century outbreaks of heresy, Lambert's account reads as a straightforward account, which never quite bears out the polemical potential suggested in the introduction and revived in the conclusion. Pointing out that contemporaries were not prone to think of religious dissent as the product of class differences or

even well-intentioned reform, he boldly claims at the outset that churchmen "believed that heresy was the work of the devil." This implies (*pace* Moore, John Boswell, and others) a rather static model for the ecclesiastical attitudes to dissent, and the author's choice of words could well discomfit some medievalists who work on the historical contingency and complexity of medieval persecution. Lambert unfortunately does not follow this statement with an examination of the theology of the devil's work on earth (traceable to Gregory the Great, above all), or the tension between Augustinian and Gregorian attitudes towards evil and their implications for views on heresy. In fact, his presentation of the church as occasionally scrambling to articulate responses to the dissenters, whose spiritual dynamism demands a reaction, seems to militate against such a monolithic view of medieval thought on the nature of dissent. It is consistent with his general method, however, that Lambert should present ecclesiastics as perpetually reacting to the dissenters, as spiritually powerful heretical beliefs forced the church, not necessarily reactionary but always a step behind, to adapt or persecute. This approach reflects the author's acknowledged methodological debt to Herbert Grundmann's *Religionsbewegungen im Mittelalter*, and above all that book's conviction that heresy is "born out of religious conviction" rather than the growth of institutional structures or social tensions.

Still, the sometimes dry and schematically organized text does not quite fulfill the introduction's promise that the account will be a messy one. In his introduction Lambert rightly insists that "the history of medieval heresy is a terrible story." He invokes Henry Charles Lea's *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (1888) to ally himself with scholars who simply could not maintain any detachment when faced with the fact of the human intellect's suppression. The main chapters of *Medieval Heresy*, however, relentlessly follow a traditional narrative in the style of a general textbook, and rarely suggest messiness. There is

little, beyond a general explanation of inquisitorial procedures, about the nature of coercion (or the fear inspired by it), and Lambert's eschewal of theory seems to have denuded his book of discussions of such sociological phenomena as pollution fear, which contributed to the horror associated with dissent and have inspired many fruitful inquiries into medieval heretics. Finally, although the chapter on the clerical counter-attack on heretics does allow that inquisitors could and did create heresy where none existed, the inherent methodological challenges presented by scholars' necessary reliance on mostly pro-clerical sources are seldom addressed.

These criticisms, however, are those of a specialist, and many apparent deficiencies could well be calculated sacrifices in the interest of the greater goal of providing a straightforward synthesis of a vast subject. This goal is more than adequately met. *Medieval Heresy*, in its updated form, should remain the essential reference work on medieval religious dissent. That such a large survey manages to reflect slight shifts in scholarly consensus and provoke discussion of approaches and methodologies makes Lambert's achievement even more impressive.

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