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Recent Trends in the Study of the Middle Ages

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RECENT TRENDS IN THE STUDY OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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My talk this afternoon looks both backwards and forwards: backwards to the tradition of medieval studies and the influence of new approaches and methodologies in the second half of the twentieth century – my own professional lifetime – and forwards, more briefly and tentatively, to what appear to be the directions in which medieval studies are moving, both in Europe and in America. I shall not discuss other parts of the world, though interesting work is being done by medievalists elsewhere, as in Japan and Australia. I shall concentrate on the history of medieval religion and religious life, in part because it illustrates some of the most striking developments and changes in medieval studies and in part because the CEU has made notable contributions in this field. It is also, I should admit, the area I know best and in which much of my own research has been done. You will forgive me, I hope, if I draw at places in my talk on my own experience and on a paper that I presented recently in England on the study of medieval religious life and spirituality.¹

Traditionally the study of medieval religion was considered the domain of scholars who were themselves clerics and monks and who in many respects laid the foundations of the modern study of medieval history. The works of members of learned congregations like the Bollandists and Maurists are of enduring scholarly value. Few areas of historical research can boast such a distinguished genealogy, but until recently, with a few notable exceptions, it was largely neglected by lay scholars.

Academic historians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries inherited much of the secularism and anti-clericalism of the eighteenth century, often without the learning, and tended to neglect the study of religion, which they equated with irrationality if not superstition. Among other reasons for this neglect were the predominantly national focus of medieval studies, the reaction against the clerical domination of education, the view that the study of religious thought and institutions was the business of clerics rather than lay scholars, and more generally the perceived decline in the importance of religion in the modern world. The study of religious life

¹ Giles Constable, "From Church History to Religious Culture: The Study of Medieval Religious Life and Spirituality," in *European Religious Cultures: Essays Offered to Christopher Brooke on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Miri Rubin (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2008) 3-16.

and spirituality was regarded as antiquarianism and was almost completely ignored in most secular universities until well into the twentieth century.

Serious and important research was still done by clerics and monks even after the widespread suppression of monasticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After its revival in the mid-nineteenth century, monks were almost more cut off from secular society than before, and scholarly work was not always encouraged in religious communities. Scholars like Ursmer Berlière and André Wilmart were not widely known among lay historians. The great exception was David Knowles, the first Benedictine monk to hold a professorship in an English university since the Reformation. His history of the monastic and religious orders in England, which appeared between 1940 and 1959, took the scholarly world to some extent by surprise and helped to create a more receptive attitude towards the history of monasticism. Among lay scholars before the Second World War the most important were Carl Erdmann, whose *Die Entstehung des Kreuzzugsgedankens* is a study in the changes in Christian thought and spirituality in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and Herbert Grundmann, who studied the religious and social basis of the religious movements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, stressing the role of women, and showed their common features rather than the differences which scholars who were themselves members of religious orders tended to emphasize.

Medieval religious history was even less studied in America than in Europe, aside from Henry Charles Lea and a small but dedicated group of scholars working on the crusades. The emphasis was on constitutional, institutional, and legal history, with occasional references to the history of art and to economic and intellectual history. Ernst Robert Curtius in a lecture delivered in 1949 commented on what he called the “phenomenon” of American medievalism. “The American conquest of the Middle Ages,” he wrote, somewhat oddly, “has something of that romantic glamor and of that deep sentimental urge which we might expect in a man who should set out to find his lost mother,” which tells us more about the European view of America than about the American view of the Middle Ages. The Belgian scholar Fernand Van Steenberghen was surprised by the growth of American medieval centers, institutes, and journals and questioned whether “there were sufficient vocations of medievalists in the New World to assure the vitality of all these centers of research.” He was writing in 1953, before Kalamazoo!²

² Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. W. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton

This then was the situation when I completed my PhD, in 1958, and began to look for an academic position. The subject of my dissertation was the letters of Peter the Venerable, who was abbot of Cluny in the first half of the twelfth century. It was unusual at that time (and still is, I believe) to present a textual edition, even with a substantial introduction and notes, as a doctoral dissertation, and my professors in the department of history at Harvard, who worked in traditional fields, thought that I would find a position only in a seminary. In fact the winds of historiographic fashion were changing, and my fields of interest – monastic history, the crusades, letter-writing, medieval forgery, all growing out of my work on Peter the Venerable – have been a modest growth industry over the past half century. More work is being done today on saints' lives and miracles than on the history of parliament. The study of religious life and spirituality took off, as it were, in the 1950s and 1960s and marks one of the major shifts in medieval studies during the past hundred years. Popular religion has been described as “perhaps the most successful as an interpretive rubric ... of all the historical approaches to come out of the 1970s.”³

In the study of medieval spirituality the name of one scholar stands out, Jean Leclercq, whose career covered the second half of the twentieth century. Himself a Benedictine monk, his influence spread far outside the walls of his monastery or perhaps I should say monasteries, since he was a mighty traveler. Taking up in many respects where Wilmart left off, Leclercq was an interpreter as well as an editor of texts. He wrote dozens of books and hundreds of articles which, though of uneven quality, reached a wide audience and of which a number were translated into English. Wilmart and Leclercq, together with Marie-Dominique Chenu, changed the accepted view of medieval religion and spirituality. They oriented research away from the thirteenth century, which had long dominated the study of intellectual and artistic history, and emphasized the importance of the twelfth century, when there was fundamental change in the way people saw themselves in relation to God and the church and which marked the beginning, they said, of modern religion.

This included a redefinition of the *vita apostolica*, which no longer involved withdrawal from the world but came in the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries to include an active apostolate, and which was central for Francis of Assisi and the Mendicants, for whom it was not enough to be individually poor in

University Press, 1990), 587; F. Van Steenberghen, “Les études médiévales en Amérique,” *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 49 (1951) 414. Editor's note: The annual Kalamazoo Medieval Congress at Western Michigan University now attracts about 3000 participants a year.

³ John Van Engen, “The Future of Medieval Church History,” *Church History* 71 (2002) 498.

possessions and in spirit, which was equivalent to being humble, without also being collectively poor. The established ideals of withdrawal, asceticism, and contempt for the world did not disappear and were combined with a stress on physical labor and also on human values, such as friendship, of which the importance in religious circles has been emphasized in recent studies. These ideals increasingly spread outside religious communities into lay society, and by the end of the Middle Ages many men and women shared the austere standard of behavior that had previously characterized formal religious life and included practices and devotions which governed the smallest details of everyday life, such as arranging the crumbs left on a table after a meal into the form of a cross.

In addition to these outward marks of piety there was a stress on spiritual inwardness, which was one of the defining characteristics of Christian spirituality from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, when religious life was marked, John Van Engen said in his recent book on the *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, by an “intense preoccupation with the interior, shaping or reshaping the soul in the presence of the divine.” People believed that their eternal salvation depended on their personal relations to God as much or more than on their behavior or on the intervention of the clergy. This stress on inwardness led in its extreme forms, through self-knowledge and love of God, to a withdrawal into self-denial, nothingness, and ultimately union with the Godhead in such a way, as Grundmann put it, that “the religious experience supersedes all questions of ethics and morals” and that the perfection of the individual believer exceeds the merits and claims of the saint. “Souls face to face with God, stripped of all masks and guises,” again according to Van Engen, “this was the heart of the matter.”⁴ For these people the ideal of the imitation of Christ involved not only following the example of His life on earth but also identifying with him as the suffering Son of God. This approaches the limits of orthodoxy, though at that time the boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy were less fixed than they became later.

There has also been a growing awareness among scholars of the importance of medieval religious institutions for modern society, including political democracy (*maior et sanior pars*), prisons (“cell” is a monastic term), the importance of clocks and time-keeping, and the organization of industry. The origins of sign language

⁴ Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, Historische Studien 267 (Berlin: Emil Ebering, 1935) (repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftlichen Buchgesellschaft, 1961) 181-182; John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 296, 318.

go back to the system of signs used in medieval monasteries. These are the subject of a different talk, however, and I mention them here only to emphasize the range of the influence of religious life and thought and the overlap of spirituality with popular culture.

Turning now to new developments in the history of religious life, I shall divide my discussion into three sections: first, the types of life led by religious men and women, *religiosi* and *religiosae*; second, their relations with secular society; and third, the effect on the study of religion of some of the new historical techniques and approaches.

Among the many interesting developments regarding the nature of medieval religious life has been the study of the common features of religious movements, rather than their differences, and the attention paid to groups and individuals who were not technically speaking monks and nuns, in particular to canons, hermits, and recluses, and to lay religious, female as well as male. In spite of significant earlier work on canons, some of it dating from the eighteenth century, their status and importance were not widely recognized and they are still not fully appreciated, partly in view of the variety of canons who existed in the Middle Ages. Some of them, known as regular canons, followed a rule and were barely distinguishable from monks; others resembled the clergy and were called secular canons; and yet others, as Alcuin recognized already in the ninth century, occupied a middle position between the two. Hermits and recluses, who were also known as anchorites, were less cut off from monastic, clerical, and lay society than was once thought and than descriptions of their way of life suggest. Many people, including women, spent periods of time in hermitages and later took up other types of life. Several scholarly congresses have been devoted to the study of hermits and eremitism, but the subject is far from exhausted.

The same is true of people who withdrew informally from secular society, either in groups or sometimes in their own families, which has been called domestic monasticism. This way of life was in its nature ephemeral and has left few written records. In institutional terms it constituted a sort of half-way house between the laity and better-established forms of religious life, and it is sometimes described as semi-monastic. People of this type were recognized as occupying a distinct and occasionally suspect status, parallel to that of heretics, but not the same, since they were more concerned with a religious way of life than with theology. It appealed particularly to women to whom some of the older and more organized forms of religious life were closed, and concerning whose history the flood-gates of research

have opened during the past generation, though they had never been fully closed. Many aspects of the religious life and culture of women throughout the Middle Ages have been studied in recent years, including the recognition by some of the reformers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries of the religious aspirations of women, who played a significant part in the institutional, spiritual, and intellectual life of the period. In the late Middle Ages women had a distinctive spirituality, concentrated on the physical body and found in both literature and art, of which the nature and importance have been increasingly recognized.

The members of religious communities were bound together by a common way of life and often by adherence to a written rule of a set of customs, which formed the basis of what have been called "textual communities." The study of rules and customs was a fertile area of research in the second half of the twentieth century. The *Corpus consuetudinum monasticarum*, when complete, will include new editions of all known customaries. It is paralleled for Greek monasticism by the corpus of Byzantine monastic *typica*, which has opened the way for comparative study of religious life in the Latin west and Greek east. Many groups of religious men and women, however, including some of the most celebrated, had no written customs and were governed in the details of their daily life by oral traditions. Rules were sometimes adopted relatively late, and customs were written down when the founding members died, a daughter house was established, or another community wanted to adopt a similar way of life. Written customaries can be seen as a reaction to the threat of change and reform, welcome in principle might be met with hostility in practice. Some customaries represented a conservative effort to preserve existing practices, and their evidence must be taken with a grain of salt, because they tend to reflect an ideal rather than a reality. Very few if any religious houses adhered to every detail of a written document. Even the Rule of Benedict was modified in countless ways. It is impossible now to recover the unwritten customs of a community which were preserved in the minds of its members. Religious life was not an unchanging monolith, and there has been a growing recognition by scholars of the rapidity and occasional violence of change – or reform, as it was commonly called – which could uproot long-established customs and traditions.

The organization of most religious houses and the daily life of their members were governed by an elaborate system of rites and ceremonies, both within the church – the liturgy – and outside. Rites are of interest to sociologists and anthropologists as well as to students of religion and history, who have emphasized the importance

of ritual as an expression of religious ideology and feelings. It involves not only what was said and done but also what was sung and seen, since observers as well as performers participated in ceremonies and responded to images and buildings. Rites were adapted to meet the institutional and social in addition to the physical needs of religious life. The old contrast between rites and reason, which were traditionally regarded almost as opposites, has thus been broken down. Ritual is a way of looking behind the texts into the hidden world of attitudes and emotions, which have attracted the attention of scholars in recent years. The application of psychology to history has also helped to deepen our understanding of the religious needs of contemplatives and has inspired a greater sympathy for the visions and miracles that played such an important part in the inner life of monks and nuns.

Religious men and women were also involved with life outside their enclosure, both in other communities and in the secular world. Even those who never left their monasteries had spiritual ties with the lay world which were none the less important for being invisible. The prayers, masses, and blessings of monks and nuns benefited society as well as themselves. The names of innumerable lay benefactors and so-called co-brothers and co-sisters were listed, together with the names of former members of a community and of the communities with which it was affiliated, in the *libri vitae*, necrologies, and books of commemoration and confraternity; and prayers, masses, and alms were offered on the anniversaries of their deaths. These works have been known for many years, and some were published, mostly as undifferentiated lists of names, but they were regarded as of little use to historians. Their detailed study and publication, both in facsimile and in a form as close as possible to the originals, showing the placement and grouping of names, has been the special work of scholars at the University of Muenster, whose greatest single achievement has been the reconstruction of the lost necrology of Cluny, which contains thousands of names and shows the wide range of Cluny's influence.

Another relatively little-used source on the associations between religious houses are the mortuary rolls which were carried from house to house after the death of an individual for whom prayers and liturgical commemoration were solicited. A new edition of these rolls is in preparation. Each house that was visited made an entry on the roll, which is often of interest as evidence not only of the value placed on liturgical intercession but also of the level of literacy and writing skills in the community, including houses of women, about whom very little is otherwise known. The study of *scriptoria* and of library catalogs has likewise contributed to our somewhat meager knowledge of the intellectual life of monks and nuns, and

especially of the role of nuns as scribes. The movement of manuscripts is another fruitful area of research, showing the intellectual connections between communities, which extended far more widely than was previously assumed.

These spiritual and intellectual links were paralleled by political, social, and economic ties, which can be described collectively as the regional ecology of a community. Most older works on monastic exemption, immunity, and advocacy, though still not fully replaced, were written from a legalistic point of view and did not take fully into account the religious character of the institutions. Economic historians in particular tended to take an aggressively secular view. The lands of religious and lay proprietors were frequently contiguous and interlocking, however, and influenced one another not only in agricultural techniques but also in religious attitudes. Lay proprietors in the area of Cluny, for example, down to the lowest levels of society, were referred to as “neighbors of St Peter,” who owned the land of Cluny and from whom they derived protection and prestige. The development of monastic priories and granges resembled that of secular estates, and many towns grew up around religious houses that needed the services of lay dependents. Research on proprietary monasteries, or *Eigenklöster*, over which outside lords exercised a measure of control, has taken a flexible approach and emphasized the elaborate framework of personal relationships between religious houses and local magnates. Monasteries were *foci* of political and economic power and sometimes became centers of regional principalities.

The study of medieval religion has thus contributed to our understanding of all aspects of the Middle Ages and has itself been enriched by research in other fields of medieval studies. A glance at the titles in the *Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental*, which started in 1970 and now includes almost a hundred volumes, shows an astonishing expansion in the number and types of sources used by scholars today. They include not only written sources, some of which (like the necrologies and mortuary rolls mentioned above) were known but not fully used, but also non-written sources, including art, music, and architecture, the industrial and figurative arts, and, perhaps most important, archaeology, fossil pollens, tree-rings (dendrochronology), and human remains such as bones and teeth, which have thrown light on the age, health, and diet of medieval men and women. Though treated separately in the *Typologie*, these sources should not be regarded as water-tight compartments and have interacted with each other on several levels. Textual and material sources are complementary, even when they reach different conclusions, and some scholars speak of what they call “documentary archaeology.”

Some archaeological findings have in particular thrown doubts on the written sources, forcing historians to reconsider the “myths of origins” embodied in chronicles and foundation histories. Geography, topography, and aerial photography, which developed in the period between the two World Wars, have shed light on the siting, foundation, and ground-plans of religious houses, some of which have entirely vanished above ground. There has been a progressive retreat from the divisions which at one time dominated the study of medieval history, not only political and geographical divisions – mountains, oceans, and rivers, which are now regarded as connectors as well as dividers – but also divisions of religion and society. There is a new stress on the interaction between Christians and Jews, and also, in some areas, Muslims, and on the porousness of social ranks, which were less rigid than was once believed. Chronological periods, to which I shall return, are also less strictly divided than previously, and there is more emphasis on transition than on separation and transformation. Even the Reformation is seen as a bridge as well as a divide.

This work has changed in many ways our view of both the theoretical and the practical workings of medieval religious communities. The setting of religious life, the images seen and adored by monks and nuns—and by lay men and women who attended and participated in their ceremonies – the processions, and the hymns and chants were all part of medieval religion. In recent years there has been particular interest in sacred spaces, the relationship to each other of the various buildings in a monastic enclosure, and their influence on the lives of the inhabitants. Churches were the image of paradise and the heavenly Jerusalem, sometimes in a literal as well as a symbolic sense. Cemeteries were par excellence the sacred spaces of the dead. Only a start has been made on the study of the physical aspects of medieval religious houses, however, aside from their architecture and decoration, or of the recruitment, social origins, and numbers of their members, though comparative anthropology has contributed in many respects to our understanding of the workings of society, especially in the early Middle Ages. The flourishing field of gender studies, in which new advances are made every year, has investigated almost every aspect of the lives of women in the Middle Ages. A great deal more is known today than even a few years ago about the religious life of women, and there have been some fascinating detailed studies of the life of late medieval nuns.

Detailed studies known as microhistories are fashionable today – I tried my hand at one myself – but they are less applied to medieval history than to later periods, above all owing to the lack of sources. Quantitative techniques applied to history,

which were fashionable a generation ago under the collective name of cliometrics, seem to have fallen somewhat into disfavor among medievalists, also owing perhaps to the relatively small numbers of sources that can be reliably analyzed statistically. They have been applied with good results, however, to necrologies and charters, which include enough names to be analyzed for prosopographical evidence and for the changing membership and social structure of religious houses, about which comparatively little is otherwise known. Statistical studies, principally word counts, have also been made for historical texts. So far this has privileged certain types of texts, above all those in the *Patrologia latina* and the *Corpus christianorum* and many types of sources, such as charters, letters, and sermons, have not been statistically analyzed. In some respects, indeed, computer techniques have oriented research away from the study of integral original texts. And images of manuscripts and works of art have to a great extent replaced the study of “the real thing.” “Image enhancement” has opened new avenues of approach but has also in some respects distorted the originals. The term “secondary sources” is now sometimes used for works derived by computers from primary sources.

A different type of innovation is associated with the shift of interest from one period to another. The popularity of Late Antiquity – what we medievalists call the early Middle Ages – is well established and associated with some of the new methodologies and techniques, especially archaeology, which has enlightened many dark corners of what used to be called the Dark Ages. Late Antiquity is well represented in the research at CEU. I also sense a shift in interest among medievalists away from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which are called the High Middle Ages in English, to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, where much original work is being done after a long period of neglect.

These shifts have been paralleled by the realization that medieval society was not monolithic, either chronologically or structurally, and that it involved changes and was open to different influences, from both inside and outside. The old belief in the uniformity of the Latin Christian culture and “the Medieval Mind” has been replaced by a more nuanced view of the interpenetration of western society with Judaism, Byzantium, and Islam, and also the Scandinavian world. There was an interaction and overlapping rather than an exclusiveness between various spheres of influence. There is a great deal to be learned from life at the margins and how the center was seen from the peripheries. Especially the old view of Christendom and Judaism as two mutually exclusive worlds has been modified by research into the contacts and influences between the two.

Finally, among innovations, I should draw attention to the shift in historical thinking, partly under the influence of anthropology and sociology, that accepts that what people think, as well as their material interests, influences their behavior and that beliefs and ideas play a part in shaping history. Closely related to this is the renewed recognition of the importance of religion both in the past and in the present world. A case in point is the crusades, which were long regarded as a basically secular movement masquerading under a religious cover. To argue that the crusades were motivated by other than self-interest was regarded as naïve. They are now increasingly seen as a religious movement with political, social, and economic overtones.

These changes are healthy and contribute to the vitality of our field. When I am asked by graduate students, as I occasionally am, what the trendy areas of research will be in the future, I reply that they know better than I do, because what interests them will probably interest their contemporaries. I myself have been fortunate to work in fields which have attracted the interest and research of many scholars in the past fifty years. It may be time to move on, and a young historian might be well-advised to return to some of the great traditional fields of research – war, politics, representative institutions, law, economy – and to study them not as they were studied in the past but with the insight and knowledge of the historical innovations of the past two generations.