

## Learned and Popular in Medieval Christianities?

### A note from the editor

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This issue of *Mirator* is devoted to investigating the concepts 'learned' and 'popular' in medieval christianities. After a rigorous selection and review, the editorial board is proud to present three articles, all answering the original call for contributions from diverse yet complementary angles, and all examining aspects of religious life in medieval England. I am very pleased with the quality of the three articles in this issue, and wish to note that our current annual rejection rate for peer-reviewed articles is 50%.

In the initial plans for this issue, and in the call for contributions that grew out of them, our editorial board raised a number of questions about the terms 'learned' and 'popular'. What did these terms mean in given contexts, how did they acquire meaning, and how were they connected to social groups? There is a complex of related concerns behind these questions, centred on a bipartite or two-tiered model of medieval religiosity, which still easily occurs to the scholarly imagination. The idea that there existed a clerical religious culture, and a popular, or perhaps indigeneous religious culture from below that resisted penetration by the former, was perhaps most influentially expressed by Jacques Le Goff as an opposition between *culture clericale* and *culture folklorique*.<sup>1</sup> While Le Goff certainly viewed the latter with more sympathy, Peter Brown criticised the long tradition of this kind of bipartition by noting that features of religious culture were too often explained in terms of the compromising of a 'high' or 'learned' religiosity by popular ideas, from below.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, a bipartite model, at least in terms of the clerical–folkloric, does not appear to be very useful, quite apart from how one sees the dynamics

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. his 'Culture cléricale et traditions folkloriques dans la civilisation mérovingienne', in Jacques Le Goff, *Un autre Moyen Âge*, Gallimard: sine loco 1999, 217–228.

<sup>2</sup> See his *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (The Haskell Lectures on History of Religions, N.s. 2), University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL 1981, esp. at. 17.

between the parts. In other words, it often appears less beneficial to consider ecclesiastical religious culture to be a unity, not to speak of lay religious culture—and diverse as both were, they all shared certain elements of the common Christian culture at any given time. John Blair, discussing the Christian culture of Anglo-Saxon England, notes that as far as it is meaningful to see a bipartite distinction, "the line is drawn between the fastidious, metropolitan, temperamentally *dirigiste* moral leaders whose voices come through to us ... and the diverse majority, clerical and lay, whose voices remain silent".<sup>3</sup>

In very similar terms, C. S. Watkins, in the context of Norman England, has questioned the usefulness of a two-tiered model, and the related implications of cultural developments characterised by the opposition and friction between social groups, choosing instead to emphasise beliefs that were common to the whole society.<sup>4</sup> And regarding the Late Middle Ages, Eamon Duffy has convincingly criticised interpretations that emphasise "a wide gulf between 'popular' and 'élite' religion", the latter poorly Christianised, and argues instead for "a remarkable degree of religious and imaginative homogeneity across the social spectrum".<sup>5</sup>

Even with these recent appraisals in mind, it is certainly necessary to pause and consider what kinds of religious cultures—and along what lines—one might discern in a particular context. While certain beliefs, such as the possibility of miracles, were shared by everyone in medieval society, at the same time, some Christians were setting themselves apart from others, for instance by reforming their religion and by claiming more learned practices and more authentic observance. One question that arises from these observations is what was lay religiosity, and to what extent might it have diverged from the ideals promoted by some of the ecclesiastical leaders at any given time? And, more specifically, what were these ideals? In the first of the articles in this issue (pp. 1–17), Tracey-Anne Cooper examines this question when she approaches late Anglo-Saxon pastoral care on the basis of a manuscript containing pastoral directions. She argues that lay religiosity, contrary to what is usually asserted, consisted not only of outward rituals and practices, but that pastoral care of the laity was also concerned with the ideal of internalised Christianity, often associated only with ecclesiastical

<sup>3</sup> John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2005, 179.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought 66), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge - New York 2007, 5–12.

<sup>5</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580*, Yale University Press: New Haven, CT–London 1992, 2 and 3, respectively. See also Jussi Hanska, *Strategies of Sanity and Survival. Religious Responses to Natural Disasters in the Middle Ages* (Studia Fennica, Historica 2), Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2002, 37–41.

religiosity. Closely related to these themes touched upon by Cooper is the third article in this volume by Jennifer Gilchrist (pp. 37–56). Here Gilchrist analyses a vehicle of internalised Christianity, a Carthusian adaptation of a Franciscan devotional text, and explores the connections between monastic and lay spirituality in later medieval England, revealing their common ground in affective piety.

Finally, in the second (by chronological order) article of this volume (pp. 19–35), Jaakko Tahkokallio approaches the theme and its associated questions from a different social perspective. Taking as his starting point a Cistercian comment on the religious value of a figure of courtly (perhaps even popular?) culture, Tahkokallio highlights the repurposing of patristic anti-pagan polemics in the creation of an ideal of proper Cistercian religiosity. Towards this end, Aelred of Rievaulx's argument, as examined in this article, reveals the common ground between Cistercian and courtly cultures, and at the same time represents a case for a higher, better internalised Cistercian religious culture, which is set apart from courtly culture. With his insistence on the secondariness of emotions in religious life, Aelred provides a counterpoint to the affective piety that is central to Nicholas Love's *Mirror*, as examined by Gilchrist, neatly closing the circle of this volume.

In conclusion, while the number of questions raised by this volume far exceeds the number of those treated within the ambit of its articles, the editorial board hopes that readers will find inspiration in this issue for their own research into these and related questions. Here I wish to record my gratitude to our peer reviewers, the authors, the editorial board, the board of Glossa—The Society for Medieval Studies in Finland, and the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies. Next year's issue will include a selection of papers from the bi-annual *Dies mediaevales* conference, to be held at the University of Tampere in October 2008, concentrating on cultural networks and contacts in the Middle Ages. The editorial board asks for the submission of completed articles by the end of January. As always, all submissions, whether on theme or not, are very welcome.

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