



Medieval Christianity: A New History

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An expansive guide to the medieval world, with new attention to women, ordinary parishioners, attitudes toward Jews and Muslims, and more

For many, the medieval world seems dark and foreign—an often brutal and seemingly irrational time of superstition, miracles, and strange relics. The aggressive pursuit of heretics and attempts to control the “Holy Land” might come to mind. Yet the medieval world produced much that is part of our world today, including universities, the passion for Roman architecture and the development of the gothic style, pilgrimage, the emergence of capitalism, and female saints.

This new narrative history of medieval Christianity, spanning the period 500 to 1500 CE, attempts to integrate what is familiar to readers with new themes and narratives. Elements of novelty in the book include a steady focus on the role of women in Christianity; the relationships among Christians, Jews, and Muslims; the experience of ordinary parishioners; the adventure of asceticism, devotion, and worship; and instruction through drama, architecture, and art. Madigan expertly integrates these areas of focus with more traditional themes, such as the evolution and decline of papal power; the nature and repression of heresy; sanctity and pilgrimage; the conciliar movement; and the break between the old Western church and its reformers.

Illustrated with more than forty photographs of physical remains, this book promises to become an essential guide to a historical era of profound influence.

Medieval Christianity: A New History Details

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Felix says

A very enjoyable survey of (mostly) western medieval Christianity. I could definitely see using this as a textbook - Madigan gives as comprehensive a treatment as possible of almost a millennium of history over a large area, without being excessive. Delicate subjects (treatment of women, Jews, etc.) are handled thoroughly, and with care. Only two major omissions stood out: there were only a few mentions made of Byzantium (though more than many general books on "Medieval Christianity," which was gratifying), but there was almost no discussion of sexuality, normative or otherwise. Consideration of these topics would have been a valuable addition to this otherwise-excellent study.

Todd Stockslager says

Review title: In the long run

One of the enduring mysteries of Christianity for me (an evangelical Protestant) is the fact that in the Gospels Jesus left the work of spreading the word around the world to human beings who he knew were fatally flawed. And in the long run, it seems to me to be a long way from the living rocks of the Aran Islands to the cold marble of Rome. That last remark refers to my powerful moments alone on the Aran Island of Inishmor off the west coast of Ireland standing amongst the ruins of 6th and 8th century churches and grave memorials which spoke so powerfully to the warm living faith of these solitary people beyond the edge of the known world.

Meanwhile, back in civilization, as Madigan provides in a thumbnail introduction, the church was created by the reinvigorated apostles after Pentecost and progressed from persecution to imperial approval in Rome over its first 500 years; those distant Celtic Christian men and women (Celtic monasteries were communities of men, women, and children) are poignant witness to the geographical growth of the church as well as its demographic and organizational growth in the center. Madigan then gives an introductory narrative account of the next 1000 years of Christian history divided into Early (600-1050 AD), High (1050 to 1300), and Late (1300 to 1500) Medieval Christianity.

It is of course an account of popes and priests, hermits and heretics, theologians and kings, monks, nuns, and knights,. The seemingly incidental and coincidental division of saints and sinners cuts across all those categories in ways that defy easy descriptions and historical explanations. These distinctions and nuances of the historical record and accepted historical analysis make for interesting reading in Madigan's capable writing style. Intending Medieval Christianity as a textbook introduction, Madigan does a good job of outlining, organizing, and then recapping his material as only a professor familiar with his material could do with this level of ease, while his writing ability makes the material come to life for the general reader just "auditing" the subject. He provides chapter notes for further reading, but not footnotes to trace specific references, along with a chronology and glossary and some maps and illustrations.

The narrative of 1000 years of history is too long and twisted to be served by any sort of recap, so let me just highlight what I took away as one of the key threads in the history: Madigan talks in terms of three different ways of representing the church which grew and shifted in numerous an unpredictable ways throughout this

millennium:

1. The clergy facing God representing the church to God.

Madigan points out that in the earliest period of the church, preaching and ministry to the laypeople of the church (as a denominational whole or in individual congregations) was an unknown concept. Instead, the clergy literally faced God at the alter, saying the approved prayers and liturgy with backs to the congregation, speaking in a language (Latin) unknown to most of the listeners in any case, and in fact probably impossible to hear because of poor acoustics, the lack of amplification, and possibly an intentional effort to obscure the spoken words by mumbling or speaking in a low voice!

2. The clergy facing the church representing God to the church.

This view saw the clergy turning around, again literally, interpreting God in the form of the holy scripture, including both the original Hebrew "old" testament and the written "new" testament, the now canonical Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and the epistles to the early church. This view of the church had major ramifications for the structure of the church: for it to represent God to the church through scripture it had to have a consistent and authoritative voice, giving rise to theology, orthodoxy and (not paradoxically) heresy. From these roots grew a central church organization and bureaucracy, centered in Rome and basing its authority on Jesus's commission to Peter as the Rock upon which He would build His church. Yet even while facing the congregation in this view of the church, preaching and ministerial care were not yet part of the church.

3. The church as an invisible universal body nourished by the clergy.

The second view of the church took root and grew despite the early account of missionary journeys throughout the Mediterranean region and the recorded instances of sacrificial caring in the Acts, a shortcoming that was addressed in the third view of the church. This view arose in fact in contrast to, and in many cases opposition from, the established church organization and authority by "preaching friars" whose vows of poverty, service, and walking missionary zeal grew out of the cloistered monasterial view of separation from the world. Combined with a sometimes ecstatic visions and callings directly from God (words which then and still today are still looked upon by established church organizations with nervous apprehension and concerns for defense of the established orthodoxy) these men and women abandoned or gave away property and health as they took to the road preaching and caring for the world outside of the church. In response, the Medieval church began to incorporate these services into their services, as it were, co-opting some of the zeal and good will created by these wandering servants of men and God. While some of these mendicant orders were themselves co-opted by the church and frail human nature, becoming in time fabulously wealthy and often corrupt organizations, they fostered the spread of the view of the church as an invisible and universal body of believers, some saints and some sinners, but all in need of care.

Throughout this period, as Christianity grew, spread, and matured, the organization of the church was growing apace as well. This led to bureaucracy and institutional politics, of which there are plenty of examples in Madigan's account. But while he documents the history of corrupt popes and royal conflicts at the top and center of Christianity (with the important caveat that modern terms like "secular" and "national" government don't apply to the time and place of which he is writing), he also provides as much insight as can be gained or at least inferred from limited historical sources about the way normal people worshipped and believed, and about women's roles in the church and Christianity. The history and justification for pilgrimages, veneration of saints, and the collection and display of relics are vital parts of the story,

providing a historical foundation for the saints and relics I just read about in *Saints Preserved*. If the story stopped with the cold marble of papal palaces in Rome, the story of Medieval Christianity would be a sad, sad story indeed, but Madigan gives us the human touch when it can be found.

But what about Jesus's decision to leave his church in the hands of humanity, of Peter no less, the most impetuous and mercurial of the Apostles. It was bound to be a train wreck, wasn't it? And indeed, as Madigan wraps up his history in 1500, Martin Luther is already in the church, just a few short years from posting *Sola Dei Gracia* on the door to the hearts of now billions of people in history since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. But is it really a train wreck, or just the inscrutable turn of history and divine wisdom as God has never been more alive and worshipped in more churches by more hearts in more ways than anyone could ever have imagined in 600, or 1000, or 1500?

Phil says

I picked this up just before my March Break holiday because I wanted a new book to read and I happened to notice this in the new books shelf of my favourite theological book store. I had been thinking I'd like to read up on where mediaeval church history has gone over the last few decades, mostly because, while I had done extensive reading in mediaeval history in my undergrad days, I hadn't really been following the field. Madigan's book seemed to fit the bill for updating myself and it has done so admirably. In this very accessible book, Madigan goes through the traditional focal points of mediaeval church history as well as highlighting new developments and directions for research. Madigan opens this scholarly world knowledgeably and skillfully, especially given the breadth of the field. It is well worth the time for reading.

If you are looking for a similar update on mediaeval church history, this is the book for you.

Seth Mcdevitt says

This is a wonderful overview of Christianity in the medieval ages. It gives more attention to the lives and influence of women on medieval Christianity than others I have read, which is wonderful. Not for those casually interested in history, but it is not so scholarly that the significantly interested, but not scholarly, (me), can't gain a lot of information and insight from this book. Worth the money and time.

Tadas Talaikis says

Wanted more in depth, but then probably it wouldn't fit into several volumes, but this is also good.

What I've got from this book most is one thing. Such things ("idiocracy") are exceptionally interesting for me. It's about massacres of Jews by Christians that led to Dickens' et al idiotic stories depicting the "stereotypical Jew" (greedy, etc.) that further led indoctrinated kids admire racist "A Christmas Carol". It's a laugh on the floor, when you "know things" :-D

Justin Evans says

Nicely done; Madigan is much better (or so it seemed to me) on the high and later middle ages; the early chapters drag a little, with too much written about comparatively unimportant matters. It's not clear to me, in particular, why there are two chapters on Christianity and 'the Jews', but almost nothing at all about western and eastern Christianity. You only know the latter exists because there's a paragraph or so about the schism. Of course, it is clear to me: this is not a book about 'Medieval Christianity,' but a book about medieval Christianity in western Europe, and it was written recently, so the recent historical preoccupations find their way in. But I'm not sure that's a responsible thing to do in what is meant to be an introductory textbook.

AskHistorians says

'This is a book for beginners' claims Madigan at the beginning of his extensive endnotes. While producing a book for beginners might have been his intention, Madigan's command of a vast wealth of scholarship spanning the pre-history and entirety of the Middle Ages makes a beginner even of the seasoned professional. The scope and greatest strength of this magnificent new addition to the study of medieval Christianity is the thorough contextualisation of lines of development in medieval Christianity from the beginnings of the early churches right to the inception of the Reformation. Madigan achieves this without falling into the trap of ever painting these developments as inevitable - chiefly through taking a series of asides exploring alternative, later unorthodox, branches and expressions of spiritual Christianity. Like any survey, the author occasionally glides lightly over particularly contentious pressure points in modern historiography and sometimes the pressure of a subject stretching from ca. 150 to 1500 is noticeable. Still, Madigan is able to expound not only on the relevant clerical or religio-cultural context but set these within a wider social, political, and economic framework. A must read for anyone interested in medieval history. A small criticism is perhaps in an occasionally overly obtuse language which can occasionally spoil the rhetorical flow of the work - but your mileage (and vocabulary) may vary.

Genevieve says

A great overview of the current state of the field. Good for novices as well as those with a little more experience on the subject.

Mark says

In 1970 the great British medievalist Richard William Southern published his book *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. A volume in the "Penguin History of the Church" series, it served for over four decades as the standard survey on the relationship between Christianity and the medieval world. Kevin Madigan makes it clear at the start of this book that he intends for this book to serve as a replacement for Southern's seminal text. It's a ambitious goal, and one which he achieves successfully by providing a lucid and wide-ranging survey of the role Christianity played in western and central Europe in the Middle Ages.

Scott Law says

Interesting, but basically a textbook style. Put it down around midway and haven't gotten around to finishing it. Worth reading if you have the time and inclination.

Hank Pharis says

Its been awhile since I read a church history book that introduced me to so much new information. Thus I really enjoyed this fair treatment of medieval Christianity.

(Note: I'm stingy with stars. For me 2 stars means a good book. 3 = Very good; 4 = Outstanding {only about 5% of the books I read merit this}; 5 = All time favorites {one of these may come along every 400-500 books})

Steve Donoghue says

A superb and surprisingly readable summary of Christianity during the long, dark centuries when it ruled the Western world

Nancy says

The Middle Ages formed a bridge between the Dark Ages
- the powerful ruled, while the powerless looked only to survive.
and the future
- filled with knowledge starting from one monastery to another...

Review

KC says

i prefer my historical introductions organized chronologically rather than topically, which is one of the reasons i wanted a different work on this topic. alas, when the library website says a book is on the shelf, it doesn't always mean the librarians know which shelf it's on. so, Madigan rather than Lynch, and reading about 12th-century women mystics in the final chapter, just pages after discussing 15-century street preaching in Florence.

the topical structure in itself isn't necessarily a deal-breaker, but Madigan's project is one of wheedling apology for the less savory endeavors of the medieval church – the Inquisition was really *that* bad, y'all! – and the topical organization of chapters lets him neatly compartmentalize the narrative, giving sanitized introductions to most of the major players in the main chapters and reserving mention of their shitty beliefs and/or actions for the chapters on anti-Semitism and the Crusades (which, natch, are always at the end of the

major sections). if you want your medieval Christian history sans mass murder, look no further! just skip the chapters with "Heresy" or "Jews" in the headings.

also his writing is vague, circuitous, and prone to making unsubstantiated pronouncements.

Gary says

Properly presented medieval history is exciting. Some books or lectures go astray by presenting the facts by using the one-darn-thing-after-another (ODTAA) method. This book does not. It covers the topic thematically with a chronological order providing coherence through its focus on Christianity. This book is an incredibly happy compromise between a history strictly of Christianity and a history strictly of the middle ages. By combining both topics into one book the author gives a synthesis that's almost magical in the telling. I love this period of time but sometimes I get lost in the fog of historical facts or theological arguments that are irrelevant to me because I can't follow them. That doesn't happen with this book and therefore I can say I really enjoyed this book. (Durant's "Age of Faith" covers the topics as well as this book, but he's dated, racist, sexist and often anachronistic and a modern reader just has to hold ones nose with him, but he is worth the read).

I just love this period of history but not all books know how to tell the story as well as this one does. There's a theme that does run through out and it is of the order of how did we go from forming 'beliefs before reason' to using our reason to determine our beliefs. Thus producing a man such as Thomas Aquinas and therefore leading to the reformation and the starting of the foundations of science and modernity.

The process that Christianity needed to discover itself and lead to who we are today is laid out elegantly in this book. The book never really dwells on the theological fine points but always seems to keep the story moving. Theology as a rigorous philosophy starts with Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard and his "The Sentences" (Thomas Aquinas got a Masters in "The Sentences"). The author takes time to explain who they are and what they thought, but I was never overwhelmed with the complexities of their arguments.

Our understanding of history changes. This book points how our current understanding often differs from 30 years ago. The Cathars are more prominent, Wycliffe was more influential, the Avignon Papacy was more relevant than what was recently believed, for example.

Overall, a well written and understandable book which demonstrates why this time period can be so much fun to read about.
