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**Constance Hoffman Berman, Ed.** *Medieval Religion: New Approaches*. Rewriting Histories. New York and London: Routledge, 2005. xxiii + 422 pp. Figures, notes, index. \$105.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-415-31686-3; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-415-31687-1.

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Routledge's *Rewriting Histories* series is intended to introduce students not only to new scholarly approaches to a particular topic, but also to do so precisely at excitingly contested crossroads. The series seeks to place students productively within the swirling eddies of constantly revised scholarship, revisions and rethinkings that are credited by the series specifically to new cultural, political, or generational interests that successively question the orthodoxies of the past (pp. xi-xii). In *Medieval Religion: New Approaches*, volume editor Constance Hoffman Berman observes that scholarship on medieval religion before, say, 1970 was, in effect, the history of the Roman church: histories of the papacy, of theology, and of religious orders often written by Catholics or, in the case of the last, members of those very orders. Following Gabrielle Spiegel and Paul Freedman, Berman argues that demographic change in the academy—chiefly “the recruiting of women and minorities”—has cooperated with other factors to revise and to reshape this restrictive (and restricted) church history (p. 2). Berman identifies two major tasks engaged in by revisionist scholars: first, to “expan[d] the boundaries” of the field (by including women and “understudied groups”) and, second, to consider “the consequences of administrative structures, theology, and canon law on the interaction between insiders and outsiders” (p. 2). This volume intends to present the “most innovative new scholarship” that—particularly through those tasks—presumably aids in the field’s transformation into, truly, the history of medieval *religion*.

For this presentation, Berman has gathered fifteen essays (all previously printed elsewhere as journal articles or book chapters) and divided them into four sections: “Religious Speculation and Social Thought,” “Reform and Growth in the Clerical Hierarchy,” “Women in the Practice of Asceticism and Contemplation,” and “Increasing Violence and Exclusion.” She has composed introductions, ostensibly pitched to the student rather than the specialist, to each section, in which she articulates the specific departures made by its essays from earlier historiography. The essays’ authors include some of the best-known senior scholars who work in medieval religion, such as Caroline Walker Bynum, Jonathan Riley-Smith, Jo Ann McNamara, Giles Constable, and Berman herself. (The fact that ten of the volume’s fifteen contributors are women illustrates the demographic change of which Berman speaks.) The original publication of the contributions ranges from 1977 to 2004, with the majority of pieces dating from the 1990s. Consequently, many of the arguments presented here have long been the subject of discussion within, and digestion by, the field. This review, then, will focus on the volume’s desire to transmit the most recent scholarly picture of “medieval religion” to students of religious history. What does “medieval religion” look like in this survey of “new approaches”?

The dominant departure from old-style “church history” presented here is undoubtedly the vivid visibility of women within medieval religious life. While the volume’s third section explicitly concerns women’s experience, an interest in gender history is evinced elsewhere. The essay by Caroline Walker Bynum that begins the volume was an upending study of the use of “female” imagery among male Cistercian religious. Bynum argues that the use of maternal or “feminine” language (protection, nurture) to describe divine love and to ponder the abbot’s duties responded to a particular monastic context, implying no universal, warm commendation of actual mothers or actual women (p.33). Jo Ann McNamara’s and Dyan Elliott’s discussions of church reform in part two might likewise be reasonably

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included under the rubric of gender history, and also remind us of male clerical misogyny. Both essays concern how the success of eleventh-century church reform, which sought to “monasticize” all clergy and to eliminate lay influence in church life and governance, was for women not the triumph long claimed by modern church historians. Both assert reform’s deleterious effects on women: for McNamara, powerful noblewomen who were prominent actors in secular and ecclesiastical politics; for Elliott, the clergy wives who enjoyed both prestige and authority in local parishes and who constituted a demographic eradicated by reform.

The volume’s third section, “Women in the Practice of Asceticism and Contemplation,” includes Berman’s own investigation of Cistercian nuns, in which she argues that anachronistic criteria of what constituted the early order have been unfairly applied to women’s communities by modern scholars who were, in part, unwisely trusting medieval Cistercians’ own erasure of women from their origins. Similarly, Caroline A. Bruzelius’s “Hearing is Believing: Clarissan Architecture, c.1213-1340,” argues that the strict enclosure of mendicant women ironically hindered their eucharistic devotion, as the location of the nuns’ choir in churches often prevented their easy viewing of the elevated host. Bruzelius suggests that before fourteenth-century devotion more insistently suggested new church design, hearing the mass was posited as religious women’s sensory substitute for sight and taste.

It is significant, perhaps, that the most recent essay republished in *Medieval Religion*, Fiona J. Griffiths’s examination of abbess Heloise and husband Peter Abelard’s exchange on the pastoral care of nuns, pointedly shuns models of women’s “passivity” and “decline.” Griffiths demonstrates that Abelard, and perhaps other male clerics influenced by him, perceived the *cura monialium* as a spiritually rewarding duty, rather than the burden to be shirked that other scholars have contended. She also emphasizes Heloise’s agency as abbess, potentially choosing between Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux as pastoral patrons and electing at points not to follow Abelard’s liturgical advice. Interestingly, Griffiths here appears to modify the perspective and conclusions of previous historians that include McNamara herself (p. 293), well illustrating the healthy continuity of historiographical revision.

The other revisionist expansion of “medieval religion” is the inclusion in scholarship of Christian orthodoxy’s “outsiders” and “others,” excluded both by the Roman church in the Middle Ages and subsequently by modern church historians. Given Berman’s explicit identification of the consequences of church policy on outsiders as a key theme of new approaches, *Medieval Religion*’s part four (“Increasing Violence and Exclusion”) contains two surprises. The first is the low profile of R. I. Moore, fairly identified as the medievalist architect of scholarship on exclusion. Berman remarks that “only a generation ago”—that is, circa 1985—“a textbook on medieval Europe would have discussed Jews...only as precursors of Christianity” (p. 317). Although it was not a lonely cry in the wilderness (for example, Gavin Langmuir had then long considered the ideas that would reach apotheosis in 1990 with *History, Religion, and Antisemitism* and *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*), Moore’s *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, published in 1987, was perhaps the most forceful lever of this historiographical turn.<sup>[1]</sup> Although Moore’s book is briefly footnoted, students making a first acquaintance here with the literature of medieval exclusion would have been well served by more explicit discussion of its influence.

The second surprise in this presentation of recent work on religious violence and exclusion is the almost complete absence of heresy and inquisition. Although the volume’s general introduction numbers heretics among the “others” to be discussed in part four (p.6), the essays there concern Jews and Muslims only. Berman’s introduction to this section explains this lacuna: after the “considerable attention” long given to heresy, “the most recent work” has complemented it by turning to “a consideration of non-Christians” (p.317). This consideration here encompasses Dominique Iogna-Prat’s analysis of twelfth-century Cluniac abbot Peter the Venerable, whose *Against the Saracens* has often been

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read by scholars as foundation for a “rose-tinted legend of Peter...as the apostle of nonviolence” (p. 334). According to Iogna-Prat, Peter’s treatise was, in fact, an uninformed, distorting, contentious diatribe fundamentally intended to “steady the [Christian] faithful” (p. 343) rather than to evangelize demonized Muslims.

Discussion of Peter the Venerable is partly continued by Anna Sapir Abulafia, who locates his *Against the Jews* within twelfth-century Christian attacks upon Judaism as unreasonable, carnal, literal, bestial: a thoroughly bodily (rather than spiritual) religion that (at the same time) disbelieved in God’s bodily-ness in the incarnation and in the eucharist, and stood outside the body of Christ, or Christian community. This linkage, to Abulafia, “contributed to the deterioration of the position of the Jews in the course of that century and beyond” (p. 359). These intellectual histories are complemented by two essays that confront the relationship between stereotype/polemic and real life, as in Miri Rubin’s argument that the circulation of tales presenting Jews as host-desecrators could serve as an adaptable “blueprint for action” (p. 372) in communities. And as with Griffiths’s contribution, David Nirenberg’s “The Two Faces of Secular Violence against Jews” seems delicately to challenge what has preceded it in the volume. Nirenberg contends that the yearly Holy Week attacks upon Jews in Christian Iberian towns were not an aberrant, chaotic mob rage that registers with limpid linearity the rising temperature of European anti-semitism. Instead, the riots, largely conducted by male adolescents in lower clerical orders, constituted “repeated, controlled, and meaningful rituals” (p. 397) that could reaffirm Jewish presence among Christians and/or could manifest ecclesiastical tensions with secular authority.

The general absence of heresy and inquisition here is regrettable, because work on those topics contributes powerfully to the matter of ecclesiastical policy and exclusion that *Medieval Religion* rightfully notes is a crucial corrective to the old, triumphalist church historiography. Students interested in pursuing new historiographical approaches to “exclusion” *within* Christianity are not best assisted by the volume introduction’s footnote on heresy/inquisition, which cites works that with one exception originally appeared in the 1970s or before (p. 8 n. 9). Nor is this accomplished by the reference in part four’s introduction to the scholarly “attention” paid to heretics, which lists only a Peter Biller essay on women and heresy (p. 323 n. 1). More specifically, some scholars have revised even the assumptions about religious “outsiders” that were current in Moore’s immediate wake. These include James Given’s analysis of lay people’s multiform resistance to inquisitors; Mark Gregory Pegg’s challenges to the venerable narrative of the “Cathar church”; the interrogation of inquisitorial texts (and modern scholars’ use of them to discuss heresy) by Biller, John Arnold, and Caterina Bruschi.

Yet this absence is also pertinent because scholarship on heresy and inquisition has often permitted views of lay experience. Fascinatingly, *Medieval Religion* cogently intimates that the titular concept still denotes the Roman-Christian clerical elite: the papacy, secular clergy, and monks, friars, and nuns living by rule. The large majority of the contributions—those by Bynum, Constable, McNamara, Elliott, Miller, Zacour, Berman, Bruzelius, Jansen, Griffiths, Iogna-Prat, Abulafia—focus on members of this class and offer us their perspectives.[2] *Medieval Religion* presents very few images of the Christian laity. The best glimpses are in the essays by Riley-Smith, Rubin, and Nirenberg, which are, in fact, slightly hybrid. As mentioned above, Rubin argues that tales often disseminated by clerical chroniclers found currency in lay communities, while the anti-Jewish riots analyzed by Nirenberg were instigated by lower clergy who often fought with lay agents. Likewise, in “Crusading as an Act of Love,” Jonathan Riley-Smith argues that clerics prominently featured love of God and of neighbor (eastern Christians) as themes in their hortatory rhetoric prompting the laity to crusade. According to Riley-Smith, this rhetoric lacked the “two-dimensional” love of the gospels (love your neighbor, but love your enemy too), which since Augustine could identify punishment and violence as an enemy’s benevolent, devoted correction. Riley-Smith credits this lack to anti-Muslim sentiment among the laity, which could not even permit the kind of love for an enemy that mandated force to correct him. Strikingly, then, medieval

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Christians who were not priests, monks, or nuns appear to us prominently in *Medieval Religion* as participants in violence.

The Roman clergy were indisputably the loudest and most hegemonic voices (and producer of our sources) in the Middle Ages. It is emphatically not a criticism to observe that many medievalists importantly, and necessarily, augment our knowledge by continued research into the secular and regular “religious” of the western church. Yet for readers hearkening to the book’s stated purpose of surveying the most recently emerged and vibrant peaks of the field’s topography, it is worth remarking that according to *Medieval Religion*, even the “most innovative,” “revisionist” scholarship overwhelmingly concerns those who entered the religious life of the Roman church.

We might then ask how far we must still traverse in establishing distance between our “new approaches” to medieval religion and the historiographical instincts—the “church history”—of the past. Where does the field move, after adding women to that clerical class of priests and orders, and after proving that the ecclesiastical “administrative structures, theology, and canon law” so celebrated by older Catholic historians were directed brutally against dissidents and outsiders? Indeed, while “average” Christian lay people are notoriously elusive in medieval sources, many scholars have cautiously excavated the sub-layers of textual and material evidence that evoke for us their lives and perspectives. Notable here is what is absent in *Medieval Religion*’s discussion on “otherness”: the lay beliefs and practices deemed erroneous or heretical by those popes and clerics upon whom the volume focuses (e.g. lay advocacy of apostolic poverty, the flagellant movement, forms of worship heatedly condemned as dangerously superstitious, diabolic, or pagan). Conversely, scholars have also labored to present the varieties of lay devotion (e.g., saints’ cults, confraternities, pilgrimage, mystery plays) that fell within the rubric of Christian “orthodoxy,” itself a vibrantly contested concept in scholarship. Relatedly, surely “medieval religion” is no longer coterminous with “medieval Christianity.” Judaism and Islam might be fully incorporated into the scholarly taxonomy of “medieval religion” as faiths existing in themselves in medieval western Europe—that is, as something other than Christianity’s “other.”

Introducing Riley-Smith’s essay, Berman avers that crusading violated the “real message of Christianity, which was tolerance” (p. 50). This reviewer is not so persuaded that “new approaches” to medieval manifestations of religious belief should embark upon the perilous work of judging their spiritual authenticity, in part because this posits a static, fixed essence that the book’s very purpose would seem usefully to sabotage. The foundation of the outmoded, restrictive “church history” was that only certain subjects (men, popes, theology, orders) were true tags of the Christian faith. But as these revisions of earlier historiography demonstrate, “medieval religion” is an inconstant, reflective category. And as series and volume themselves would own, students familiarizing themselves with the field through *Medieval Religion* encounter there but one moment in the topic’s dynamic history. The roadmap helpfully offered to students by *Medieval Religion* places them at crossroads of scholarship that extend ever into the future.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

- Caroline Walker Bynum, “Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing”
- Jonathan Riley-Smith, “Crusading as an Act of Love”
- Giles Constable, “The Orders of Society in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries”
- Jo Ann McNamara, “Canossa and the Ungendering of the Public Man”
- Dyan Elliott, “The Priest’s Wife: Female Erasure and the Gregorian Reform”
- Maureen C. Miller, “Secular Clergy and Religious Life: Verona in the Age of Reform”

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- Norman Zacour, “The Cardinals’ View of the Papacy, 1150-1300”
  - Constance Hoffman Berman, “Were there Twelfth-Century Cistercian Nuns?”
  - Katherine Ludwig Jansen, “Mary Magdalen and the Contemplative Life”
  - Caroline A. Bruzelius, “Hearing is Believing: Clarissan Architecture, c.1213-1340”
  - Fiona J. Griffiths, “Men’s Duty is to Provide for Women’s Needs’: Abelard, Heloise, and their Negotiation of the *Cura monialium*”
  - Dominique Iogna-Prat, “The Creation of a Christian Armory against Islam”
  - Anna Sapir Abulafia, “Bodies in the Jewish-Christian Debate”
  - Miri Rubin, “Desecration of the Host: the Birth of an Accusation”
  - David Nirenberg, “The Two Faces of Secular Violence against Jews”

## NOTES

[1] Gavin I. Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), and *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

[2] While the monograph from which Katherine Ludwig Jansen’s “Mary Magdalen and the Contemplative Life” is excerpted attends to “popular devotion” to Mary Magdalen, the selection here treats themes in sermons, hagiography, and art intended chiefly for contemplative, often cloistered, men and women. And although one might argue that the priest’s wife was a laywoman, Elliott notes that she “was referred to as *presbyteria* or *sacerdotissa*, and according to some rites even received a distinct garb and special blessing at the time of her husband’s ordination” (p. 125). The transformation from liminal *sacerdotissa* to concubine, her final push into the category of “laity,” was the end of the process discussed by Elliott.

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