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John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2005. viii + 320 pp. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 03-40-80786-5.

Review by James Given, University of California, Irvine.

This is an ambitious book. In it, John H. Arnold presents a new and challenging way of interpreting the history of lay religious practices between 1000 and 1500 and the ways in which those practices interacted with the official positions of the church hierarchy. Arnold does not focus on the history of doctrine or on the overall institutional development of the church; instead his goal is to analyze the phenomena of belief and unbelief, and the relation between the two.

Arnold's book has three principal arguments. The first is that medieval Christianity was not a seamlessly integrated whole. For Arnold, "...there was no *one* medieval lay faith but a spectrum of faith, belief and unbelief" (p. 230). At any one time different, often very different, currents of belief existed side by side. Arnold's second argument is that in studying medieval religion, we should analyze lay practices, and not just the development of dogma or institutions. Belief was largely constituted by practice. There was (and is) no real "difference between belief, its expression in language, and its experience in lived reality" (p. 19). For the most part lay religious practices were in agreement with the norms maintained by the church authorities. These areas of agreement are what Arnold understands as constituting "belief." "Unbelief" Arnold defines as those practices that diverged from the official norms and were at times labelled as superstitious or even heretical by church leaders. In this sense "unbelief" actually implied belief, but in something different from that expounded by church authorities. Arnold's third major point is that the meaning of lay religious practice was fundamentally ambiguous. Religious practices could simultaneously consolidate and undermine belief, as the laity interpreted the church's message in such a way as to fit in with its own views and problems. Lay interpretation usually was in agreement with that of church authorities, but at times it could differ widely.

Belief and Unbelief is organized around the discussion of six themes, "acculturation," "intercession," "community," "selfhood," and "dissent," each of which is treated in a separate chapter. "Acculturation" discusses the process by which individual believers were socialized into medieval Christianity. The central Middle Ages saw a significant change in the ways in which the church understood this process. Before the twelfth century, the Church had assigned the laity a rather passive role in the search for salvation; this was a task that was undertaken on their behalf by the church, especially through monastic prayer. From the twelfth century on, the church began to expect the laity to be more actively involved in the quest for salvation. Over time, the church developed many mechanisms with which to educate the laity about what it meant to be a Christian. Among these were the practice of private confession, the images that decorated churches, the development of religious dramas, and the increasing spread among the laity of vernacular religious texts. The contents of these last could even be made available to the non-literate by the practice of public reading. However, since most of these forms of education emphasized conformity of practice rather than deep understanding of church dogma, there was a great deal of room for the laity to develop its own interpretations of the church's message about sin, salvation, and obedience. This process was facilitated by the fact that by far and away the most important means of religious indoctrination was instruction by relatives in the context of the household.

The overwhelming concern of these individuals who were acculturated into Christianity was salvation, and aid and comfort in their worldly existence. In a chapter on "intercession", Arnold discusses how the

laity sought intercessors, the most important of whom were the saints. Arnold uses the example of saints' cults to illustrate how lay religious practice could both converge with and diverge from the norms of the institutional church. Despite the church's development of a means by which to define what sanctity meant through a formal canonization process, what really made a holy individual a saint was the opinion of the local community. Saints' cults, of course, usually buttressed the church authorities, enabling them to associate themselves with a saint's charismatic powers. The popularity of pilgrimages to the relics of holy men and women was also a not inconsiderable source of income for the clergy. But those behaviors that impressed observers as particularly holy, and which were the markers of a saint—poverty in dress and food, frequent prayer, and public displays of apostolic or penitential behavior—could also be appropriated by those critical of the church, such as the Cathar “Good Christians” whose ascetic way of life persuaded many that they offered a way to obtain salvation that was as good, or indeed better, than that of the Catholic clergy.

Individuals, of course, live in communities. Thus in his chapter on “Community,” Arnold discusses the role that religious practices played in the formation of community. He argues that communities are not natural or innate; they are things that must constantly be made and remade. Religious practices thus are not simply reflections of an already established community, but an integral tool in fashioning that community. Public, collective activities, such as guild membership, participation in the rituals that marked important transitions in an individual's life—baptism, confirmation, marriage, and death—forged community. So did guild membership, processions, feast days, and religious plays. Of these mechanisms the most important was the mass, in which the local community assembled to witness the central mystery of the Christian faith. These practices, however, could cut two ways. Collective religious behavior could underline, and at times, exacerbate social, political, economic, and cultural divisions within a community.

Turning again to the individual, Arnold devotes a chapter to “selfhood.” He agrees with those historians who have discerned a medieval “discovery of the individual.” This individual, however, was embedded in a web of social relations. What the Middle Ages discovered was thus “a variety of groups within which self-hood could take different corporate states.... Each person (individual in this sense) sought to reform themselves; but the process of reform was to adopt an existent template” (p. 186). Individuals were encouraged to see themselves as falling into particular status categories, i.e., maidens, widows, merchants, artisans, etc., each of which had its own way of living the good Christian life. Moreover, the model of the self that the church propagated “was one that understood itself through the prism of sin, and attempted to change itself through the search for salvation, mediated by the clergy” (p. 153). For the most part, the models of conduct held out by the church agreed with lay sentiments. There were, however, areas of definite disjunction, particularly concerning ideas about proper sexual conduct. By the end of the middle ages many, but not all, of the laity, were living Christian lives which emphasized a “kind of interiorized devotion” (p. 189). These new ways of practicing Christianity, however, did not displace the earlier communal, public practice of religion. Individuals could, and did, practice both.

In the book's final chapter, Arnold addresses the phenomenon of dissent. There were some people in medieval Europe who appear to have been radical skeptics or atheists, but their number was never large. For the most part “unbelief” consisted not of complete rejection of the church, but of certain elements of Catholic belief, for example, the real presence in the Eucharist, purgatory, and the sacramental powers of the clergy. According to Arnold, the “most common form of skepticism...was doubt over whether all (or even much of) the Church's message was true, or was indeed the only way to look at things” (p. 229). This attitude was illustrated by the not uncommon opinion among the laity that good Jews and good Muslims would be saved in their faiths just like good Christians. As for “heresy,” the most radical form of dissent, Arnold puts himself firmly in the camp of those who see heresy primarily as a construct of the church authorities. What made a person a heretic was not the adoption of heterodox beliefs and practices but defiance of church authority. Rather like those criminologists who argue that “crime

waves” are really “policing waves,” Arnold contends that heresy “is not the irruption of deviance within an otherwise stable arena. It is the sign, rather, that authority is attempting to police that arena, place labels on what it rejects, and thus attempt to shape belief and action to a desired orthodoxy” (p. 206).

Arnold’s scholarship is impressive. He has read widely in the primary and secondary literature. The book is crammed full with valuable insights and interesting digressions on all sorts of matters related to Christian belief and practice. Arnold also makes effective use of insights drawn from sociology, anthropology, and critical theory. Although this is an excellent book, it does have some flaws. Despite Arnold’s assertion that one of his principle topics will be the relation between belief, unbelief, and power, power makes only episodic appearances. The structure of the book is also rather loose. Arnold’s tendency to tuck important generalizations unobtrusively away in the middle of paragraphs does not improve the situation. The lack of a conclusion is also a major flaw. Finally, Arnold’s habit of making a generalization, and then immediately qualifying it, although it is central to his goal of portraying the ambiguity and multiple meanings of religious practices, can grow wearisome.

These, however, are mere quibbles. *Belief and Unbelief* is a fascinating, and largely convincing, effort to rethink important aspects of medieval religion. It should be read by all those with any interest in medieval culture.

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