

Europe's most powerful state whereas by 1300 it was weak and divided. Indeed, between 1220 and 1302 no emperor was crowned. Individual realms gained practical and theoretical autonomy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Even Pope Innocent III accepted the idea that 'the king is emperor in his own realm'. So, just as church reform of one kind contributed to urban autonomy, so reform of another kind resulted in the multistate system. While the papacy did weaken the empire it did not itself wind up as a sole effective ruler. The Great Schism and the Conciliar movement plus the writings of men such as John of Paris, Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham challenged papal monism and delegitimised papal temporal rule.

The authors cite a good deal of international relations literature to show that, typically, bellicist or endowment theories are adduced to explain European state formation. The former maintain that war and its associated phenomena generate states whereas the latter point to geography and economic resources. This book tries to show that religion, specifically threads of religious reform, were actually decisive in medieval Europe. For the pre-Gregorian era of reform the authors draw on the work of John Howe and Robert Bartlett. For the book's later material they hew closely to the work of Francis Oakley and Brian Tierney. They have read very widely and medieval historians will find aspects of their arguments quite familiar. What will be new is the whole package, so to speak, and the emphasis on religious rather than secular issues. I kept thinking how very different this book's arguments are from those of Joseph Strayer's *On the medieval origins of the modern state* (1971). The authors use the word 'unanticipated' several times. I applaud their candour. But I do wonder about intentionality. Have Møller and Doucette heaped up a very tall pile of coincidences? I cannot think of a single source that promotes or even observes the thesis articulated in this book. In fairness, the authors' research is not based on primary sources. They synthesise a large literature. Still, circumstantial evidence is admissible in court and the authors have a huge amount of it.

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Manuals for penitents in medieval England. From Ancrene Wisse to the Parson's Tale.

By Krista A. Murchison. Pp. xiv + 175. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2021. £60. 978 1 84384 608 6

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Krista A. Murchison has produced a well-researched, thoughtful and helpful study of the extant English medieval penitential manuals, an enormously popular and important body of texts that contributed a great deal to late medieval culture.

Murchison promises to show how the medieval penitential manuals 'developed and functioned in Medieval society' (p. 3) and therefore opens with a quick review of the situation before the Fourth Lateran Council required, in *Omnis utriusque sexus*, confession at least once a year of all the faithful, and here she is admirably clear and thoughtful. Murchison shows convincingly that clergy and laity were engaged in self-reflection, not just a mechanical process, well before 1215.

This allows her to move into the subsequent chapter on the *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1220–30) without having to argue that it represents something new, and instead focus on what was a genuinely new insight about this well-known guide for enclosed women: that it seems to be addressing, and expecting to be used by, multiple audiences. Using Ruth Evans's ideas – which are Wayne Booth's from *The rhetoric of fiction* – of a contrast between the 'intended audience' and the 'implied audience', Murchison shows through an intelligent analysis of pronoun use that the *Wisse* seems to have a 'general audience as well as a specific one' and could be 'the crest of a thirteenth-century wave of lay penitential education' (p. 53).

Thus the *Wisse* becomes a bridge in the shift in these manuals' audiences from the cloister to the home. Murchison then begins to explore manuals such as the lay-focused *Manuel des Péchés* (c. 1260), which ostensibly are teaching the elements of the faith but whose real interest is 'in guiding an individual through confessional preparation' (p. 68). These guides that 'ground the abstract theology of the faith in accessible, everyday examples' crucially use *exempla* to assist the examination of conscience. She is absolutely correct to say that these were not de-luxe volumes, but functional, practical books, like 'a user manual rather than a coffee-table book' (p. 75) that encouraged reading that was 'frequent and engaged' and 'slow and careful' (p. 76). A volume like *Handlyng synne* was indeed meant to be handled to do its work. Chapter v, 'A reforming curriculum', shows how 'self-examination started to be described as a kind of reading itself' (p. 102), with sin as a mark in a scroll that could be wiped away by confession. Indeed, the *Ayenbite of Inwit*, she notes, sees the 'book of conscience compared to a physical book in the penitent's hands' (p. 103).

Murchison is particularly good in these middle chapters, where she explores how reformers like Pecham, Rigau and Gerson propelled this reform into the fourteenth century, and how the structure of the Ten Commandments, the seven works of mercy, the seven deadly sins and the *Pater noster*, the 'prayer of the people', became a new framework not just for educating lay audiences about the tenets of the faith but the very terms in which they examined their souls and analysed their actions. 'If you see the essentials of the faith as just something to be memorized', she astutely notes, 'you miss its potential for sites of engaged reading and self-analysis' (p. 115). That is perfectly on point and a helpful corrective to misunderstandings of these guides.

At other times, however, Murchison accedes too far to today's post-Foucauldian interest in power. In her chapter iv she explores quite well the very persistent worry at the time that when the manuals discuss sexual sins, they should be careful not to describe things too vividly, as these might be occasions to excite interest in those very sins. With what we know today of pornography and its addictive qualities, that might seem sensible, but for Murchison, it only 'points to an unease over who should have access to knowledge' (p. 97). Soon the entire enterprise of the manuals and confessional practice falls under this shadow. As the manuals became more widely spread, she writes, 'they must have also been felt as a potential threat to the role of the clergy in the penitent's life' (p. 105). And again: 'confession must have been felt by many as a terrifying burden and a mechanism of social control – one that, like its modern analogue, was fundamentally threatened by the potential for abuse' (p. 142). One can acknowledge power differentials and abuses

in religious life, one hopes, without the reductionism of that ‘must’, and one can acknowledge that confession might have negative aspects while allowing that many could through it experience freedom from the burdens of sin. Surely the rest of her book makes the implicit argument that the clerics who with no small effort composed these manuals were genuinely interested in the self-examination, reform and recovery of the penitent’s lives, and not just power. But by her conclusion, Murchison doubles down on this position: ‘the medieval Church, regardless of modern theologians’ talk of altruistic interests, undeniably created a system of social control unlike any other the West had seen’ (p. 149). With one phrase, beginning with a sweeping ‘regardless’, Murchison here seems to damn with faint praise the very subject of her book: the efforts of these manuals’ authors, and the enormously popular reforms of the friars, to help the laity with genuine problems in their lives.

In the larger argument of the book, however, Murchison does quite well, contending with medievalists’ early modern brethren – as many of us have for some time – that self-reflection and self-knowledge well predated the fifteenth century. And she admirably defends the position that one could engage in self-reflection without leaving the realms of orthodox thought: ‘a work need not be considered heterodox to promote self-knowledge or self-reflection’ (p. 24). She is particularly good in her last chapter in answering unfortunate scholarly readings maintaining that Chaucer’s Parson is a ‘harbinger of intellectualism and modernity’ (p. 145). Here in her last chapter she is able to use the evidence of her entire book to show that, quite the contrary, ‘there is ... nothing unusual about the Parson’s emphasis on self-examination, in-depth reflection, and the inner life’ (p. 146). It is a shame that in 2021 one still needs to make this argument, or that people still read Chaucer’s final tale so poorly, but it is a very good thing that Krista Murchison engages so well in this effort.

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Donor portraits in Byzantine art. The vicissitudes of contact between human and divine. By Rico Franses. Pp. xiv + 247 incl. 64 ills. Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023 (first publ. 2018). £25.99 (paper). 978 1 108 40758 8
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This book was first published in hardback in 2018 and now appears in paperback. It was widely and favourably reviewed – even, some might say, admirably so, which in my opinion is no more than a very accomplished piece of work deserved. It transforms the Byzantine donor portrait from a relatively straightforward question of prosopography into a gateway to the world beyond because it is the author’s contention that the intention behind the donation, of which the portrait is a record, was to influence the donor’s posthumous fate. In similar fashion to an icon the donor portrait is presented as a point of contact between the human and the divine, which explains why the author prefers the designation contact portrait rather than donor portrait. The task of understanding how this might be conveyed artistically requires that the author first investigate Byzantine beliefs about the afterlife. In doing so he turns a problem – apparently of art history – into one of religious belief. I can only suppose that the book was not reviewed in this