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by David Luscombe

When Mr Southern produced *The Making of the Middle Ages* in 1953, he illustrated it with photographs and was praised for the way he scooped up such a revealing collection of personalities and instances. Now in his new general work on *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*,¹ the photographs have been displaced by graphs and tables, and the selection of 'moments' in the life of the medieval Church is disclaimed in favour of a study of the interplay and tension between medieval society and its Church, and of a study of the continuous adaptation of the institutional modes by which the medieval Church attempted to satisfy the changing requirements of society. All too often ecclesiastical history lapses into the history of the organization and life of the Church as seen from the inside, and no doubt this is the image which the phrase 'Church history' evokes in many minds, but what is here studied is the history of the Church looked at from the viewpoint of society at large. Already by the ninth century western Church and society were so closely identified that those outside the Church were usually outside society also, but there is no risk of confusion here if one grasps the fact that throughout the medieval period elements in the Church continually tried to tune its responses to changing social demands.

This book is structured according to a pattern of threes. Each of the five essays which form its core is planned in relation to the differences which separate a primitive age (*c.* 700–*c.* 1050) from an age of growth (*c.* 1050–*c.* 1300) and an age of unrest (*c.* 1300–*c.* 1550). Each essay is unquestionably a masterpiece. That on Byzantium and the West pursues the double theme of Rome as the source of western unity and the source of division in Christendom as a whole. The essay on the papacy shows theory evolving in relation to social change. On bishops Mr Southern traces the development of papal supervision of dioceses which made it easier eventually for secular rulers to take over from the papacy the whole business of episcopal appointments. As all important diocesan disputes were attracted to the papal court, the point came when a bishop might have no importance in a diocese. Not so dissimilar in the way in which time inexorably shipwrecks its best creations is Benedictine monasticism. Down to the eleventh century Benedictine monasticism had an indisputable function, but it was over-promoted by its friends and the humane and tolerant pursuits of later medieval Benedictine monks required both wealth and aristocratic leisure. On the other hand, the contributions of Augustinian canons win from Mr Southern

¹*The Pelican History of the Church*, 2. Penguin Books, 1970. 376 pp. 40p.

the finest short appreciation ever offered of their modest services for men of moderate means and moderate needs. Unlike monks, the canons were not 'a handsome species'; they were, says Mr Southern, like ragwort on the stone walls of Oxford or sparrows in an English town. They required no massive territorial structure; they could die out when enthusiasm grew cold; they rose to universal standing with the Order of Preachers. Eventually, Mr Southern argues, it was impossible to keep on creating adequate institutions by reference to the Rule of Saint Benedict or to any Rule whatsoever, and with Groote all formalism in the religious life was avoided in favour of 'the retreat into the soul (which) provided an acceptable religion for busy modern men'.

It is hard to think of any recent book which is superior to this in the persuasiveness of its art. Here we have a clarion-call that the western Church should be seriously studied by any who wish to evaluate the benefits of institutions. It will be welcomed, and not only by medievalists, as a major re-thinking of ecclesiastical history as social history. But it is in its individual perceptions that the work bites most. For example, by an inspired guess Mr Southern sees attractiveness in religious begging when the chaos of growing cities is such that secular begging is already a necessity. But is it also true that hysteria and dissent spread more commonly in towns? There is much in the book to provoke such discussion. To state that every circumstance of twelfth-century society favoured the rapid growth of papal law is to omit much from the definition of circumstance. Nor is it absolutely true that the descent of papal authority could be traced step by step without ambiguity or ignorance; Ekkehard of Aura found difficulties enough concerning Linus and Cletus. Moreover it is an exaggeration to say that the old sacred kingship had no place in the new world of business when the new world was also that of the Hohenstaufen and of Saint Louis. Above all, what Mr Southern sees as the astonishing survival of medieval institutions into modern times is more or less astonishing according to one's estimate of modern requirements; Groote is only one prototype among many.

By design Mr Southern does not always come down beneath the level of the élite to that of ordinary men in their parishes and their fraternities, for this would require a different scale of treatment. By design also Mr Southern has not dealt as much with intellectual factors in this work. On the whole he treats of medieval Christianity institutionally rather than as a creed, and thought-control receives here less attention. Yet there was never a moment in the Middle Ages when Christianity did not have to justify itself. Not only were Jews and heretics always present as thorns in the flesh; the substance of Christian belief was itself incessantly debated in schools and in monasteries, in universities and in courts, in pulpits and in markets; and it was also enforced on the unwilling. To a large extent the

medieval Church applied its institutions to the task of keeping the ideology of the faith in trim, to maintaining orthodoxy successfully. For many students the special features of medieval western Christianity are first its remarkable expansion after the fall of the ancient Roman Empire and secondly its endurance and even intolerance in the face of opposition and qualification of every kind from other religions, from progressive academics, from the apathetic and the sceptical as well as the enthusiastic and the hysterical.

Mr Southern's companion volume, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies*,¹ is expressly devoted to bringing together the 'two sides of medieval history which should never be separated: the practical, business-like and earthy, and the intellectual, spiritual and aspiring.' Ranging in time from Bede to Eckhart and in flavour from Saint Anselm to Ranulf Flambard and King Henry I, these essays form an exquisite and a serene collection. Some have not previously been printed; others have already become landmarks of historiography. Of those previously unprinted two stand out especially. The first is an essay on 'The School of Chartres' in which Mr Southern, to put it simply, extinguishes Chartrain Platonism. The twelfth-century school of Chartres was not the setting for the best endeavours of Theoderic or William of Conches or John of Salisbury or Gilbert de la Porrée. The intellectual history of Europe, no less, can never look quite the same again. The second, the centre-piece of this volume, is on 'Medieval Humanism'. If it were better for many essays on this subject never to have been born, here is a noble exception. The thesis at first seems most implausible: 'the period from about 1100 to about 1320 [was] one of the great ages of humanism in the history of Europe'. But if one does not narrow the search to early signs of the Renaissance and if one views the history of medieval thought as a progression towards a more complete expression of the intelligibility of the universe, of the friendliness of the omnipotent God, and of the nobility of the natural order of which man forms part, then the scholastics, poor friends of *belles lettres* though they often were, occupy a place as developers of a world-view which represented in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a great advance in appreciation of the importance of man. As Mr Southern writes: 'The chief objection that can be brought against scholastic theology is not its lack of humanism but its persistent tendency to make man appear more rational . . . and the whole complex of man, nature and God more fully intelligible, than we can now believe to be plausible'. And again: 'it is probably true that man has never appeared so important a being in so well-ordered and intelligible a universe as in [Aquinas'] works.'

¹Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1970. xiv + 261 pp. £3.25.

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'The bishops do not consider themselves competent to judge the military and political aspects of the proposed sale of arms.' This is a baffling remark. The sale of arms doesn't have military and political *aspects*, it quite simply *is* a military and political transaction, and this is what the bishops were being asked to look at in the light of the gospel. To confess to not being competent about this is just to confess to not being competent.

'We feel it is for citizens to support or oppose the government according to the moral principles we have outlined.' The air of neutrality here is completely spurious. This document will be welcomed by those who support the sale of arms to South Africa; it will be read with something like despair by those Catholics who believe the transaction to be evil. Amongst these (to declare an interest) we count ourselves.

H.McC.