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Edited by Miri Rubin: Medieval Christianity in Practice

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INTRODUCTION

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No single volume can do justice to the variety of experiences of Christian life in medieval Europe. The contours of variety are themselves diverse. They arise from the fact that then, as now, western Europe was a vast continent of regions. In each, Christianity arrived, was absorbed, and became institutionalized under different circumstances. Think, for example, of the difference between the history of Irish Christianity and that of Italian cities; of the relatively late spread of many ecclesiastical forms to Scandinavia, and Hungary and Poland, or the unique concerns of Iberian Christians, who lived cheek by jowl with Jews and Muslims. While the liturgy was Latin, so many religious activities around it were conducted and experienced in the vernacular, above all, religious instruction; no one doubted that it had to be conducted in the *lingua materna*.

This volume follows *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*.¹ It picks up some of the trails laid down by the earlier volume, and follows them into western Europe, which over the following centuries developed a Latin theology and religious practices expressed in a variety of languages and regions that make up the Europe of today. This volume does not deal with the practices of Christians of the Greek-speaking world, within which dwelled communities that expressed their religious experiences in Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, and Persian.

Over the long period this volume covers—roughly 600 to 1500—a predominant feature of ecclesiastical organization was that which saw the spread from around 1050 of bureaucratic structures for the supervision and guidance of religious life in parishes, grouped in dioceses all over Europe. Thus, from the papal court, canon law—the law of the Church—was promulgated, but this was then applied and enforced through bishops in their diocese, who in turn passed on instructions and mandates to parish churches. Not only canon law, but modes of devotion, cults of saints, excommunications, and taxation also moved along the administrative channels. Although most business of instruction, scrutiny, and correction of religious life was conducted locally, for most people in the parish, deanery, or diocese, there were occasions that linked very clearly the pinnacle of the ecclesiastical structure with its many local parts: the excommunication of a ruler affected all religious activities in his domain, as it did in the case of Emperor

Henry IV in 1076, and when King John of England was excommunicated in 1215. The ideas expressed by an important theologian, and in which sources of possible error were identified by scholars close to the pope, could lead to summoning for scrutiny and correction, as was the case with the views of Berengar of Tours (ca. 1000–1088) on the Eucharist, condemned in 1055, and again in 1077 and 1078. Conversely, people appealed to the papacy against rulings of their local courts in cases of marriage litigation, from as far as Wales, and a saint who became famous in her lifetime in fourteenth-century Sweden, St. Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373), soon animated a Europe-wide following and created a new order, the Briggittine order. Innovations, modes of worship that developed in particular regions out of local concerns and styles of devotion, could in turn be promoted into European observances, though we tend to know more about the success stories—like the new monastic order of Cluny in the tenth century, or the new feast of Corpus Christi in the fourteenth—rather than about the failed attempts at new cults and celebrations. European means of communication enabled a wide range of relations with and responses to religious life—reactions that were full of praise or disapproval, that aimed to correct or to emulate. Ideas were turned into recommended modes of practice, but these only really took meaningful form once they passed through the local mill of testing: in a local language adapted to local weather and landscape, conditions of life, memory, and traditions. A cult of a new saint, a doctrinal statement, the attempt to extirpate a common practice—like the cult of the Holy Greyhound in thirteenth-century France—such initiatives were tested by men and women, young and old, by those whose lives Christian practice defined and whose souls it promised it could save.

Practice is the inspiring term that defines the aim of this series. The history of religion has for centuries concentrated on ideas, doctrines, and philosophies with which scholars, often priests and men in religious orders, felt at ease. *Practice* is the favored term of the social historian, always something of a historical anthropologist, whose inquiries into the ways in which concepts and ideas about the world—in a word, culture—is lived, by embodied persons, within the material cultures that provide the frame for their lives. To focus on practice is not to ignore ideas, it is rather to trace them, to observe their realization, the interpretative process by which people discussed, say, the meaning of Virgin birth, or of the Mass, and the practices they designed to follow from such understandings. Studying practices allows us who are interested—students of religion, students of the Middle Ages—to encounter the contributions and reactions that ideas and recommended procedures elicited from those who had to live by them. And so this volume will observe priests at work, friars preaching, parishioners at prayer, people of all ranks at penance. Inasmuch as practice is akin to processes of domestication and of familiarization, it seems right to observe it through the life cycle, which is often close to family life. The first section thus follows the life cycle from birth to death, through important rituals that were marked by a multitude of celebrations, with varying degrees of clerical involvement. We will then move to observe religious practice attached to work; religious practice will emerge in the calls for pro-

tection by merchants on journeys, or in the needs of fishermen for special arrangements of prayer when away from their villages. The people studied in these two sections will be revisited as parishioners. The parish provided many recommended procedures; the parish was, after all, the unit within which sacraments were received and most worship experienced. Yet as rich and as accessible as parish life was, people still chose further activities, often in smaller groups—such as fraternities—or attached to a particular devotional theme: the crucifixion, the Eucharist, the rosary. Some detached themselves from the parish, inasmuch as they joined a religious order whose structures removed the member from most local ties; some even cut away in groups seeking perfection, in rigorous, often itinerant and extremely poor and demanding lifestyles. These are the subjects of the section on the Pursuit of Perfection.

This volume brings together the contributions of forty-three scholars, experts on the life of medieval Europe. They have been encouraged to choose texts, and some images, encountered in the course of their research, and to turn them into illustrations of religious practice. The resulting volume follows a number of trails: events of the life cycle, the world of work and production, the rhythms of participation in parish life, the practices of people who sought to go beyond the basic requirements of parish religion, and some occasions on which religious ritual enhanced representation of power and authority. The texts collected here are culled from a large variety of sources: prayer books, chronicles, diaries, liturgical books, sermons, accounts, hagiography, handbooks for the laity and clergy, and romance. They thus also demonstrate the vibrant state of medieval studies, which these days thrive on multidisciplinary approaches to religious cultures and on an expansive idea of the sources that reveal the practices and ideas of medieval life.

It is hoped that this volume will offer an occasion for discussion, instruction, and exchange. It is meant not solely, or even mainly, for study of the Middle Ages. It may give rise to new encounters with the lives of individuals and communities, at their best and at their worst, through the rich languages and gestures of religion, and the aspirations for well-being and consolation they so powerfully express.

Note

1. Richard Valanstasis, ed., *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice* (Princeton, 2000).