

PRE-MODERN HISTORY

TOPIC: RELIGION & SOCIETY IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Course Number 537.01W, CID 7082
Syllabus, Online Course
Sam Houston State University
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Course Description

From the mid-14th through the mid-20th century, most scholarship in the so-called advanced societies of the West treated medieval Europe with considerable disdain. The trend began with the Italian Renaissance when the educated elite blamed the Germanic “barbarians” of the north for having invaded the Roman Empire and swept away a learned classical culture that had been around for almost a millennium. The Reformers of the 16th-century Reformation criticized the church hierarchy for having helped promote a superstitious and immoral religious culture that was ignorant of the fundamentals of spiritual contrition, saving faith, and sanctifying instruction from the Bible. The 18th-century Enlightenment *philosophes* viewed the Middle Ages as an era marred by irrationality. The French revolutionaries echoed the idea and also attempted the violent removal of the hierarchical three-estate system (clergy, nobles, commoners) which had originated in the Middle Ages. The educated elites of the later 19th century, who championed the apparent progresses made by modern science, industry and technology, characterized the medieval world as one that had been plunged by the “barbarians” into “darkness” and petty warfare following the grand achievements and more rational societies of classical Greece and Rome. These elites used the word “medieval” with negative connotations – antiquated, unsophisticated, unenlightened, backwards.

There have been a few exceptions to these general trends. Two of them came in the earlier 19th century with Romanticism and nationalism. More recently, the past several decades has generated revisionist trends in scholarship. The medieval world is now being seen in an increasingly new, more appealing light. In university circles the number of scholars dedicated to medieval studies continues to grow. The Middle Ages has enjoyed similar success with the general populace. Films such as *Braveheart*, *The Lord of the Rings* series, *Kingdom of Heaven*, and the *Harry Potter* series are among the more noteworthy examples of movies and books that have captured popular imaginations with their stories of faith and symbolism, chivalry and virtue, myth and magic.

This course will concentrate on the most definitive characteristic of Latin Christendom (a.k.a. western Christendom or western medieval Europe), namely, the relationship between religion and society and how they influenced one another. The first two books, by Peter Brown and Patrick Geary, two scholars who have been leading their field over the past two generations, consider the subject across the Early Middle Ages (to ca. 1000). Brown breaks newer ground by placing Latin Christianity within the context of the broader world of Christian communities and missions, a world which included the eastern Mediterranean and stretched as far as east Asia. Geary focuses his lens more specifically on the Franks and the Germanic world. Taking death and funerary practices as his theme, he examines in a set of essays the process by which the Church attempted to missionize and acculturate the “barbarian” world.

The next books, those by Lester Little and Jonathan Riley-Smith, concentrate on the High Middle Ages (ca. 1000-1300), a period distinguished by the revival of urban centers, a monetary economy, and cross-cultural contact. The responses to this changing medieval world produced a variety of inventive, impassioned reactions. They also demonstrate how the invocation of biblical passages and of the Christian cause could

generate such strikingly contrasting movements, all done in the name of Christ. As Little's book illustrates, some of these movements remain impressive for how they challenged a society increasingly driven by profit and inspired many to adopt uncompromising lifestyles defined by poverty and preaching. Other developments, such as Christendom's interactions with the "others" – the Jews and Muslims – have been readily criticized and have had long-term ramifications up to the present day. Riley-Smith's magisterial work on the Crusades, now in its second edition, allows us to peer into this time period that was definitive to these relationships between the three monotheistic peoples.

The final two books, by Jacques Le Goff and Paul Freedman, present us with equally engaging subject matter. Le Goff's classic, *The Birth of Purgatory*, reaches back in the Early Middle Ages to find the origins and evolution of the concept of purgatory. While tracing its development into the High Middle Ages, a period which he finds critical to purgatory's ultimate arrival and definition, Le Goff uses the concept as a window onto the mentalities of the age. Freedman's book turns to the peasants, who constituted the vast majority of the population. He follows their story through the High Middle Ages and into the Late Middle Ages (ca. 1300-1500), an age of unrest due in no small part to popular pressure demanding social and political change. Much of that pressure came from the peasants, who chafed at their oppressed, servile conditions and justified their objections on religious grounds to the point where some were fired with revolutionary ambitions.

Required Books

Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*. 2nd edition. The Making of Europe Series. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. x + 625pp. Maps, notes, tables, bibliography, Index. ISBN 0-631-22138-7. \$29.95 (paper).

Patrick Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995. ISBN 0-8014-8098-1. \$22.95.

Lester Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell Paperbacks (Cornell University Press), 1983. ISBN 0801492475.

Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A History*, 2nd edition. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. ISBN 0300101287. \$20.00.

Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. ISBN 0-226-47083-0. \$35.00.

Paul Freedman, *Images of the medieval peasant*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. ISBN 0804733732. \$29.95.

Objectives for the Course

- Gaining factual knowledge of the subject matter
- Learning fundamental principles, generalizations, & theories pertaining to Religion & Society in Medieval Europe
- Developing skill in expressing oneself in writing
- Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments & points of view

Writing Assignments

The writing assignments are six book reviews and six responses posted on Discussion Board.

Book Reviews:

You are to read the six required books across the semester and write a review for each one. Four of the books – those by Brown, Riley-Smith, Le Goff and Freedman – are fairly long and dense and therefore reviews of them should be 1700-2000 words in length. A review of 1000-1100 words will suffice for the other two books, those by Geary and Little. Book reviews are to be turned in to me via email attachment at the following email address (please send as a Word Document): his_dcm@shsu.edu. Due dates for the book reviews are as follows:

- Sept. 16: Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*
- Sept. 30: Geary, *Living with the Dead*
- Oct. 14: Little, *Religious Poverty & the Profit Economy*
- Nov. 4: Riley-Smith, *The Crusades*
- Nov. 25: Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*
- Dec. 9: Freedman, *Images of the medieval peasant*

Discussion Board:

On the date when each of the six reviews is due I will post on Discussion Board a question pertaining to the subject matter we just read. You are to write a brief response of 300-400 words and post it within 3 days.

Grading

- 82% Book Reviews (15% each for the 4 longer reviews, 11% each for the 2 shorter ones)
- 18% Discussion Board (3% each)