

## Culture and Spirituality in Medieval Europe

**Review Number:**

18

**Publish date:**

Wednesday, 1 January, 1997

**Author:**

Giles Constable

**ISBN:**

9780860786092

**Date of Publication:**

1996

**Price:**

£70.00

**Pages:**

328pp.

**Publisher:**

Ashgate

**Publisher url:**

[http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title\\_id=2887&edition\\_id=3351](http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=2887&edition_id=3351)

**Place of Publication:**

Farnham

**Reviewer:**

John Arnold

This is, by my count, the third collection of articles by Giles Constable published by Variorum; and it is a very welcome addition to the first two. Reprinted here are twelve essays, produced between 1982 and 1994. Several are easily available from other sources, but some would be harder to track down. One, a lecture on "self-inflicted suffering", delivered to a general audience, appears in print for the first time.

*Culture and Spirituality* is a wide title for a volume on medieval history. Every essay here is concerned with some aspect of those two nebulous topics, but the main area of discussion can perhaps be defined a little more closely. Constable is concerned primarily with elite religious culture, though not on the whole with the Papacy. His constituents are the great preachers, commentators and reformers of the High Middle Ages, such as St Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter the Venerable, and James of Vitry. The spirituality Constable deals with is by and large the spirituality of monasticism and the learned elite. When the laity make an appearance, it is usually as an audience or context: for example, Constable reports Geoffrey of Auxerre's description of St Bernard preaching "to rustic audiences as if he had been brought up in the country, and likewise to each other type of man as if he devoted his entire attention to studying their works". This is not a volume which analyses the reception of, or response to, that preaching on the part of those rustic audiences. In the same fashion, although elements of the essays touch upon a chronology that ranges from the early church to the twentieth century, the main focus of attention is the twelfth century. Much of what Constable has to say is concerned with that slippery turning point in the history of Christendom when new religious movements, new practices in writing (both religious and secular, devotional and communicative) and new ways of considering the Christian self, combined to form what has been famously described as the renaissance of the

twelfth century.

Having noted these boundaries, it is refreshing and challenging that a book so steeped in traditional scholarship and areas of study is able to approach the discussion with so many new and penetrating insights. In his preface to a previous collection, Constable suggested that he had been keen to investigate how people interpreted and implemented religious culture; in many ways this project is continued here. Each article is interested in the contingent and the particular, rather than accepting the hegemony and historiographical inertia of that diffuse institution "the Church". In an essay on "the ceremonies and symbolism of entering religious life and taking the monastic habit", Constable quotes Mary Douglas to stress how rituals could change their meanings according to circumstances and cultural need. As an example, the reader is shown how the veiling of an entrant to the monastery could symbolise chastity for women, but confirmation of admission to the community for men; and was later given "various symbolic meanings, and was equated with a period of sleep, death or burial" [VII, 798]. Similarly, Constable traces the fascinating struggle in the twelfth century over the colour and cloth used for monastic clothing. Otto of Freising noted that:

some [monks] in order to express contempt for the world wear only the same black clothing, but others who want no disputes over the colour or thickness are accustomed to wear white or grey or other [colors] but lowly and rough. [VII, 822]

Peter the Venerable, on the other hand, criticized the Cistercians for their white clothing:

you set yourselves alone among all according to the interpretations of the name, whence you also arrogate a habit of an unaccustomed color, and in distinction from all monks of almost the entire world, you present yourself in white among those who are black.[VII, 825]

Constable reminds us that there was not one sole voice or culture for spirituality in the period, even amongst the religious elite; and that the performance of piety could be bitterly contested.

Perhaps even more interesting are the articles that are not primarily concerned with struggle, but with the acceptance and toleration of diversity. We are becoming used to seeing almost any area of history as a site of struggle and contest, and particularly familiar with analyses that emphasize the repressive nature of the medieval church. It must be admitted that my own interests and arguments lie within this new "orthodoxy" in the study of religion and power; it is therefore all the more challenging to be presented with an analysis that underlines the non-combative elements of historical change. In "The diversity of religious life and acceptance of social pluralism in the twelfth century", Constable looks backwards from the Fourth Lateran Council (which prohibited the formation of new religious orders) to note the great upsurge in diverse religious expression which had already occurred in the preceding two centuries. By the early eleventh century the lines between clerical and monastic orders "were becoming blurred" and similarly, by the twelfth century, between monastic and lay orders. The new military orders (the Templars, the Hospitallers) would have been unthinkable hybrids in the early middle ages, but in the Christendom of the twelfth century were essential components within the Church. These changes and divisions were not totally without struggle - Peter the Venerable wrote to St Bernard decrying "the hidden and excreable variety of minds" [VIII, 36] - but the main principle was that enunciated by Anselm of Laon in 1117: *diversi sed non adversi*. The Fourth Lateran Council was legislating against further variety rather than preventing division. As Constable puts it:

In the course of the twelfth century there was thus a dramatic change in social and religious values. The monastic life came to be regarded as only one, and not necessarily the best, way to salvation. The acceptance of the legitimacy of various callings opened the way for the emergence of new ideals of religious life [VIII 46]

The essential point is that the change that came about was partly rooted in struggle but also in acceptance of others and adaption to changing patterns of behaviour. Constable is not interested in winners and losers, but in negotiations of change.

One pleasure to be gained from a collection of essays by one author (apart from ease of use) is the possibility of discerning linking themes between apparently disparate discussions. Although the mechanics of change

form the external theme for analysis, there is another, more diffuse, internal theme: the medieval preoccupation with the relationship between external sign and internal essence. In articles that range from letter-writing to monastic symbolism, asceticism to liturgical prayer, Constable returns again and again to the problem of the relationship between signifier and signified, sign and thing. It is here that the book has its greatest interest and promise, and works as a book rather than a disparate collection.

The theme of sign and thing presents itself in the first three essays concerning letter writing in the middle ages, and more particularly the problems of forgery. Constable is not concerned with later antiquarian forgeries of documents, but with the contemporary medieval practice of forging and plagiarizing letters which, as he points out, challenge some of our conceptions of what 'forgery' actually means:

Many forgeries were made for altruistic, even noble, purposes, or for obscure personal motives [...] Like miracles, visions and other works of social imagination, forgeries served to justify profound social and personal needs and reflected the hopes and fears, the praise and criticism of people in the Middle Ages [I, 2]

On the one hand letters were seen as *sermo absentium*, joining the sender and recipient in quasi-presence, as if in conversation. On the other, the idea of authorship was more fluid than today, and Constable suggests that we might see letters as "part of the larger problem of apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings" [II, 20]. As Abelard noted, "many apocryphal works are entitled with the names of Saints in order that they may have authority". How this played out in the epistolary genre was somewhat complex. St Bernard, for example, accused Nicholas of Montiéramey of sending "many false letters under our false seal" and that "no-one more richly deserves perpetual punishment". However, what irked Bernard was not that Nicholas had forged the seals but that he had misused them: "His falseness probably lay in authenticating letters which misrepresented the meaning and intention of Bernard, for whom the seal was a symbol of integrity"[II, 28]. This is a very different notion of truth and authority, and indeed of 'literary presence', than we would associate with our contemporary image of "the Author". Constable remarks in an earlier essay that "the medieval idea of truth [...] was subjective and personal rather than, as today, objective and impersonal" [I, 23]. The 'truth' that could be presented in 'forged' letters begs further questions about subjectivity and the nature of the 'presence' signified by writing. From the medieval viewpoint, there was a complex relationship to be negotiated between the sign (in this case the letter) and the thing it signified (the 'author').

This relationship appears again in two essays which touch upon the meanings of medieval clothing. In an article on "A living past: the historical environment of the Middle Ages", Constable notes that pilgrims and monks dressed in the 'anachronistic' clothing modelled on Christ; their exteriors were intended to signify a particularly authoritative referent, and by implication to advertise something about their interior states. In his essay on the ceremonies for entering monasticism, Constable indicates that this symbolism was part of a power struggle. I have already mentioned the quarrels over the colouring of monastic clothing; in fact there was also a change between the early Middle Ages, when "appearance not only represented but was identified with reality" [VII, 832], to the later period which saw the interpretation of external signs as a more problematic and fraught project. This comes to the fore in an article on "Moderation and restraint in ascetic practices". Here we are shown how external signs of piety could be cause for suspicion rather than praise. John of Salisbury castigated those who displayed excessive piety:

They display the pallor of their faces, are accustomed to produce deep sighs, are suddenly flooded with artificial and obsequious tears, with the head inclined to one side, closed eyes, short hair, an almost shaven head, a lowered voice, lips moving in prayer, a slow walk as with steps formed by a fixed proportion, ragged, covered-over and in dirty clothing [X, 324].

All of these elements were signs of piety, but they could be read as indicating a false and hypocritical interior.

As students of medieval heresy will know, the relationship between outer appearance and inner essence was thrown into greatest crisis by the wandering preachers of the twelfth century (and later the Cathars), whose

ascetic appearance and manner *had* to be read by the Church as concealing a hypocritical and diabolical interior. In his fascinating final essay on "The concern for sincerity and understanding in liturgical prayer", Constable reflects upon the flip-side of this crisis, where the fear of hypocrisy in worship led to a corresponding desire for sincerity and accuracy. Here too Constable discusses a move in medieval thought. Augustine called upon listeners to let the tongue agree with the heart (*concorda lingua cum corde tuo*), where the emphasis was on the latter organ to be in agreement with speech. As Constable puts it:

For the early Christians meditation was, like digestion or rumination, an activity which involved all aspects, internal and external, of the body since a text had to be spoken or heard before it could be memorized, understood, and put into practice. This is what was intended in the rule of Benedict when it said that in psalmody the mind should be in agreement with the voice, which provided the material for the formation of the monk's inner persona, his heart, mind, soul and spirit [XII, 20].

This relationship between external and internal in the formation of the monastic self was reversed in the later Middle Ages. Robert of Arbrissel advised Ermengaud of Brittany that "prayer of the heart and not of the lips is agreeable to God"; and Adam of Dryburgh, in his *On the four part exercise of the will*, insisted that the external signs of piety should be subordinate to the internal activity, thus reversing (though Constable suggests unwittingly) the Benedictine formulation. This collection presents a variety of tremendously useful case-studies in medieval thought and spirituality and, as I have been suggesting, on the relationship between signifier and signified, or sign and thing, or exterior and interior. It is here, however, that one feels finally a sense of lack. Constable deals with both struggle and acceptance, but does not much engage with two important areas: the struggle over literacy, and the wider work that has been done on signs and the creation of the self in the Middle Ages. The former omission raises its head in an otherwise excellent essay on the language of preaching. Although we are shown that the acquisition of Latin had a particular kind of social currency, Constable chooses not to investigate in detail the struggles between the cultural identities of *litterati* and *illitterati* that were first brought to our attention by Herbert Grundmann, and have subsequently inspired the work of Brian Stock, Robert Moore, Martin Irvine and others. The analysis of signs which I have been outlining above might also have benefitted from more theoretically informed work such as Jesse Gellrich's study of presence and absence in language, Talal Asad's work on the monastic self, Miri Rubin's analysis of the Eucharist in medieval culture, and Alastair Minnis's study of medieval authorship. This is not to say that Constable gets things "wrong", but that his analyses sometimes draw to a halt just at the point that things become interesting to those concerned with theory. For example, it would have been enlightening and exciting to have had the changing relationship between speech and "sincerity" interrogated in greater detail; what is it that allows or demands Adam of Dryburgh's momentous inversion of the Benedictine hierarchy? Can it be related to other areas of speech, writing and self-making? What does the earlier subjugation of interior state to exterior expression tell us about other cultural struggles over piety, such as the codes of monastic dress Constable discusses elsewhere?

But these points do not essentially undermine an excellent and informative collection. Those interested in a more theorized approach to medieval culture will gain a great deal from this collection, in its rich detail and thoughtful analysis. One may be left with a slight sense that Constable's conclusions miss a few opportunities for drawing on wider scholarship and implications; but more overwhelmingly one is left with the sense of inquiry, open-minded interest, and wide-ranging scholarship that consistently inform his work.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/18#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/153>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>