

**The Reformation of the Twelfth Century.** By Giles Constable (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; paperback edition, 1998) £17.95 paper.

Based on the Trevelyan Lectures given at the University of Cambridge in 1985, this book paints a complex synchronic picture of European religious institutions and experiences from the late eleventh century to the third quarter of the twelfth. Although special attention is paid to the various reformist movements and some of their potential underlying causes, the overall treatment does not wholly justify the audacious wink in the book's title: the twelfth century might parallel the Renaissance just as easily as it could the Reformation, yet it also deserves understanding on its own terms. And this is precisely what Professor Constable does very well, without too many grand historical theses to cloud the issue. These 386 pages are packed with examples and anecdotes portraying a vast range of not just monastic orders of monks, canons and nuns, but also the military orders, hermits, recluses, wandering preachers, crusaders, and penitents that gave a less organized expression to the spirituality of the age. Attention to this range of characters is designed, we are told, to put "the individual religious experience in the centre, surrounded by various forms of religious life" (86). Whether or not one buys into that methodological precept, whether or not that religious center is really there or is merely grafted onto the material, the tales of myriad individual people are certainly there, inviting us to live with the diversity rather than reduce it to theses.

Yet this discursive strength, coupled with avowedly synchronic ambitions, at times makes the going tough, producing more of a patchwork of anecdotes than a coherent progression. Individual chapters look at the variety of reformers, the types of reform, the "rhetoric" and "realities" of reform, the various types of communities, and

finally the underlying spirituality in its broader historical setting. In a sense, the work spirals towards greater generality, yet the thematic zigzagging tends to confuse dialectic strands in such a way that the General Index at the end becomes one's best chance of finding one's way. Points are made, examples are cut and pasted to illustrate the issue, then we are often given counter examples to show the phenomenon was not universal, and finally we might be reminded that this, whatever the individual point may be, did not apply in other institutions or in other countries. Methodologically, as the chapter thematics increasingly overlap, it becomes difficult to know how any of this could possibly be quantitatively testable or perhaps just plain wrong. Is there a point at which the nonce example becomes irrelevant? In this kind of spiritual history, with individual experience as the grail, obviously not. The values of erudition, with copious footnotes and references on each page, win out over all else.

More seriously, the synchronic approach willfully abolishes national and social borders with a decidedly spiritual ease, such that if we wanted to test some more general deterministic hypothesis concerning economic development or social structures it would be extremely difficult to do so. Professor Constable is manifestly uninterested in such things, declaring at the end of the work the general point that his methodology has been making all along: "As part of human nature, and perhaps its deepest part, religion is not simply a variable reaction to other aspects of human experience" (328). The passage goes on to synthesize what is considered to be the particular twelfth-century spirituality: "the rhetoric of the recovery of lost perfection, the ideal of personal reformation, and the details of monastic life were the essence of what religion meant as a way of expressing a commitment to God and Jesus" (328). The flavor is remarkably proto-Protestant, and typically at odds with the values expressed just one page previously, where it is rather a question of the "optimism,

confidence and joyful love of twelfth-century spirituality” (327). Given the extreme diversity of all that has preceded it, coupled with the eschewal of any careful step-by-step system, such suspiciously arbitrary conclusions may belong more to Professor Constable’s spiritual interests than to the vast offerings of his historical research. This reviewer found himself reading much of the work as a rather fascinating novel, wishing that a little more chronology had been preserved for the sake of plot.

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