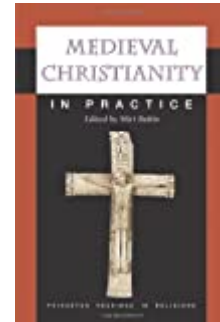


Miri Rubin, ed. *Medieval Christianity in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. xvi + 346 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-09058-0; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-09059-7.



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Medieval Religious Practices, Excerpted

One of the basic lines of division in the historiography of medieval Christianity concerns the boundary between formal Christian doctrine, including theological, juridical, and intellectual traditions, and actual Christian practice by both the clergy and the laity. Scholars long have recognized that many of the source materials for the study of medieval religion were written by and for a clerical elite. As a consequence, theological treatises, collections of canon law, and episcopal statutes have been analyzed to help understand developments in such important matters as church doctrine, changes in ecclesiastical and administrative organization, as well as the formal requirements for participation of lay people in religious rites and ceremonies. More recent scholarship broadens this view to include sources that describe the actual behavior of medieval Christians. Among the earliest of these sources to benefit from an analysis of their value for actual lay practice were sermons, particularly the exemplary stories (*exempla*) within sermons. When *exempla* dealt with either lay or clerical religious practice and belief, scholars have concluded, they reflected the

views and expectations of lay audiences regarding their own religious experiences. Similar insights have been developed regarding a wide range of additional source materials, including narrative histories, saints' lives, works of literature, letters, and elements of material culture. Within the last two decades, scholars also have begun to understand the ways in which even ostensibly prescriptive texts can be understood to reflect not only the desires of their authors, but also living practice. Among the most fruitful sources in this regard have been penitential manuals, which illuminate the diverse development of perceptions of sin, confession, and penance in different regions of Europe over time. Other prescriptive texts that have been seen by scholars to shed light on actual religious practice include liturgical rites for processions, prayer texts, and intercessory masses.

Miri Rubin's new edited sourcebook, the medieval entry in the Princeton Readings in Religion series, is intended to help further bridge the gap between our understanding of normative orthodox religion and the practice of religion by Christians. The geographical scope of

this volume is vast, covering the entirety of Latin Europe, including Scandinavia, Hungary, and Poland. The temporal scope (ca. 600-1500) is equally audacious, including materials from late antiquity up to the dawn of the early modern period. The volume specifically excludes material from the Greek-speaking world, and from eastern Christians in the Armenian, Coptic, Syriac, and Persian traditions.

The work is divided into nineteen sections focused on wide range of Christian sacraments, rites, and devotional practices, including baptism, confession, prayer, and the cult of the saints. Each section includes one to four texts that purport to show actual Christian practice. Reflecting the focus of the volume on Christian practice, Rubin invited specialists who work on a wide range of source materials to make contributions to the work. The chosen texts include blessings, inquisitorial registers, glosses, saints' lives, letters, narrative accounts, instructional manuals, sermons, penitential manuals, works of literature, material sources, charms, wills, and financial accounts.

Many of these texts appear in English translation for the first time in this volume. Indeed, some of these texts do not yet have scholarly editions. John Van Engen, for example, provides a translation of the *Life of Albert Ter*

Achter, taken from an unedited manuscript compiled in the period 1497-1501 at Deventer in the founding house of the Brothers of the Common Life. Each translated text is accompanied by a brief annotated description and analysis written by a leading specialist in the history of religious practice in medieval Europe. Thus, Julia M. H. Smith recounts the historical context in which a ninth-century pilgrimage account was written by Bishop Adalhelm of Sâces, and then ties this text into the broader question of the relationship between pilgrimage and spiritual healing, both in the ninth-century Carolingian empire, and in the broader western Christian context. Usefully, each entry also includes a list of further readings.

Because of its broad geographical and temporal scope, this volume cannot provide an in-depth image of the actual practice of any particular rite set in a single place and time. Consequently, although certain texts and discussions will be of interest to specialists, the primary audience for this work likely will not include scholars of medieval Christianity. Rather, this volume lends itself to use in undergraduate courses that deal with medieval religious practice, including western civilization and medieval surveys, as well as religious studies courses. Graduate students also will gain insights into the range of sources that can be deployed for the investigation of religious practice in medieval Europe.

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