

**The Year's Work in Medievalism**

Volume 28 (2013)

**Special Issue: Medievalism Now**

**Can We Talk About Religion, Please?**

**Medievalism's Eschewal of Religion, and Why It Matters**

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**Can We Talk About Religion, Please?  
Medievalism's Eschewal of Religion, and Why It Matters**

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With this *essai* I would like to advocate for a reconsideration of religion as an essential topic for medievalism studies. To understand why such reconsideration is necessary, examine the following titles published in recent issues of *Studies in Medievalism* and *The Year's Work in Medievalism*:

- Reincorporating the Medieval: Morality, Chivalry, and Honor in Post-Financial-Meltdown Corporate Revisionism
- Knights of the Ownership Society: Economic Inequality and Medievalist Film
- Corporate neo-*Beowulf*: Ready or Not, Here We Come
- Unsettled Accounts: Corporate Culture and George R. R. Martin's Fetish Medievalism
- Historicizing Neumatic Notation: Medieval Neumes as Cultural Artifacts of Early Modern Times
- Hereward the Dane and the English, but Not the Saxon: Kingsley's Racial Anglo-Saxonism
- From Romance to Ritual: Jessie L. Weston's *Gawain*
- The Cinematic Sign of the Grail
- Destructive *Dominæ*: Women and Vengeance in Medievalist Films
- Neomedievalism Unplugged
- Baphomet Incorporated, A Case Study in Neomedievalism
- "It's the Middle Ages, Yo!": Race, Neo/medievalisms, and the World of *Dragon Age*
- A Quest for the Black Knight: Casting People of Color in Arthurian Film and Television
- Dante as Sam Spade: Seymour Chwast's Adaptation of the *Commedia*
- The Deflation of the Medieval in Joyce's *Ulysses*
- Smearing the Medieval: Architectural Objects and Time Travel in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*
- The More Things Change: Maria Edgeworth's "The Modern Griselda"
- (Re)casting the Past: The Cloisters and Medievalism
- The Pocket Venus: Iconography and Intimacy in Victorian Miniatures
- Making Sacrifices: *Beowulf* and Film

At a first glance, "we" should pat ourselves on the back: Medievalism studies, unlike other areas in the humanities, has always been a joyously multi-disciplinary field, and essays on architecture, the arts, cinema, corporate identity, film, gender issues, the graphic novel, historical fiction, the modernist novel, music, scholarship, television, and video games would indicate that our work represents a comprehensive examination of the reception of medieval culture in postmedieval times.

A look at Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl's recent introductory study, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, would confirm this picture:<sup>1</sup> The authors adduce a prodigious list of topics, revealing Dante's changing position in the cultural imaginary; postmedieval authors' anxieties of influence when they engage with medieval or medievalizing forebears; fantasies of innocence in medievalistic

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<sup>1</sup> Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013). See my review of the volume in *The Medieval Review* (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/16674/13.07.03.html?sequence=1>).

literature for children; the mythical masculinities of medieval outlaw (Robin) and king (Arthur); filmmakers' anachronistic dreams of the medieval past; the transcendent powers of music and art at overcoming the temporal chasm separating postmedieval from medieval subjects; the escapist nature of games and reenactments; and modern views of the violence permeating premodern laws and anti-democratic political organizational forms. Within these thematic chapters, Pugh and Weisl discuss religious architecture, the Antioch Chalice, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Hildegard von Bingen, Chris Newby's 1993 movie *The Anchoress*, and the afterlife of liturgical music and performance. However, just like the recent issues of *Studies in Medievalism* and *The Year's Work in Medievalism*, they do not include a chapter examining the specific role of religion. Like the African-American characters who silently populate the backdrop of North American modernist narrative, religion in Medievalism studies is omnipresent, but plays in the dark as a subservient subset of other preferred and prevalent scholarly categories.

Perhaps we should be content with this picture, accepting what Randy Cohen, the *New York Times* "Ethicist" blogger, has diagnosed as part of general cultural etiquette: Most of us have been taught that "religion, especially another person's religion, should be treated with deference or, better still, silence by nonbelievers."<sup>2</sup> Cohen, who holds many of his own secular political convictions on social justice as dear as others do their religious beliefs, defines the difference in the public reception toward his blogs on religious and secular matters:

When I take up a secular question that provokes broad disagreement, I typically receive a few hundred responses by e-mail that begin: "Dear Sir, I am appalled..." When I write about religion, I cause a tidal wave. The week I rebuked an Orthodox Jewish real estate agent whose beliefs forbade his shaking the hand of a female client, I stopped counting after receiving 4,000 ferocious messages, lambasting not only my argument but my character, my appearance and my parentage: it was speculated that dogs played a part.

While it is undoubtedly true that some of us prefer to avoid conflict with those to whom our scholarship on religious topics might be anathema, there are just as many scholars of medievalism who wholeheartedly embrace their role as public intellectuals whose specific task it is to add research-based commentary to the usable medieval pasts we encounter. After all, scholars of medievalism do investigate and take positions on gender, sexuality, abortion, education, politics, etc., which religious individuals find objectionable. Then again, many medievalism-ists live with more than one subject position, somehow balance an allegiance to the ideals of academic study with the mandates of religious denominations and their traditions and beliefs.

From these preliminary observations I conclude that there must be additional reasons for the avoidance of religious subject matter in Medievalism Studies, and believe I can identify as the main reason the radically different approaches to temporality proposed by these two ways of conceptualizing the world and the relationship between past and present.

As cultural and semantic historians have demonstrated, time itself and a consciously temporalizing perspective on all subject matter become lead indicators for the advent of modernity.<sup>3</sup> In fact, since

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<sup>2</sup> [http://ethicist.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/27/can-we-talk-about-religion-please/?\\_r=0](http://ethicist.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/27/can-we-talk-about-religion-please/?_r=0), accessed 20 December 2013)

<sup>3</sup> See my "Coming to Terms with Medievalism," *European Journal of English Studies* 15.2 (2011): 1-13, for a detailed discussion of this claim.

the early nineteenth century temporalization becomes the central weapon in the arsenal of historicism, the thought paradigm which would not only dissect and structure the present and the past, but would guide all academic study at the modern university toward distinguishable periodicities. This process is what makes new humanities fields occupy intellectual territory by organizing their curricula and their hiring according to historical periods and to develop as quickly as possible a course on the field's own history. Even science and technology studies—fields in which new results are expressly developed to erase older ones—offer courses on the history of their subject matter.<sup>4</sup> The very same process made art and cultural historians, from the 1830s onward, abandon the vague term “antiquities” to describe that which had come before their own period, and replace or specify it first by using a more clearly defined “medieval” period and “Middle Ages” (a term later particularized into “early,” “high,” and “late”). Soon thereafter, in what Kathleen Biddick has termed a “traumatic” process for university study, the new academic specialists replace “medievalism” with “medieval studies” to wrest responsibility for researching the past away from “antiquarians,” “dilettantes,” and “journalists,” and locate it with themselves, i.e., professional scholars at colleges and universities.<sup>5</sup> In a parallel development, diachronic principles are made to dissect linguistic periodization.<sup>6</sup>

As a byproduct of this intense and accelerated temporalization, institutionalization, and particularization, and need for a distanced view of the past, the chasm between scholars and their subjects of investigation grew ever larger, to the point where historian Leopold von Ranke's (in)famous dictum to write history as it “actually happened” came to mean that an almost insurmountable epistemological boundary had been erected against anyone who sought to bridge the increasingly non-contiguous historical periods of past and the present.<sup>7</sup>

Even the academic subject of “Theology” succumbed to the pressure of historicizing, establishing Church History as an essential element of its degree programs. However, these theological faculties' subject matter, “religion,” conceived of “temporality” in terms diametrically opposed to those of the fully historicist rest of the academy. Consider, for example, one of the most enduring disputes in the history of Christianity: transubstantiation. Most Christians maintain that the person of Christ is spiritually present in the Eucharist. Roman Catholic Christians affirm what they term “real presence” of the body and blood of Christ as resulting from a change of the elements of bread and wine. Lutherans agree with them in a real eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ except that they define it as happening by sacramental union: “in, with and under the forms” of bread and wine. Methodists and Anglicans tend to avoid the controversy surrounding the question by relegating Christ's presence to the realm of religions mystery.<sup>8</sup>

More interesting than these denominations' differences is their common desire to bridge two non-contiguous points in time. At the center of their teachings is the recognition that a congregation's celebration of the Eucharist in remembrance (anamnesis) of the Last Supper is insufficient to

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<sup>4</sup> In *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), George Steiner explained best this difference between science/technology and human-centered fields of endeavor: “In the arts, in literature, in music, duration is not time. Formal and meta-mathematical logic does move forward and amend prior findings. Philosophy does not” (257).

<sup>5</sup> *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> *The Invention of Middle English, 1765-1910* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> J. D. Braw (“Vision as Revision: Ranke and the Beginning of Modern History,” *History and Theory* 46.4 [2007]: 45-60) demonstrates that Ranke's intentions were originally much more aesthetic-experiential than positivistic.

<sup>8</sup> P. J. Fitzpatrick's *In Breaking of Bread. The Eucharist and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), offers a historical survey of Christian positions on transubstantiation.

express the sempiternal nature of Christ and God and help believers enter into as close a union with the divinity as possible. Basic intellectual “recalling” following Luke 22.19, “Do this in remembrance of me,” is reinforced through a whole host (no pun intended) of liturgical actions and formulae, all forms of ritual reenactment, which culminate in the consecration of the host by the priest. The full and final, momentous albeit momentary, suspension of human historicity is to be reached when the consuming of the shared bread and wine allows for a direct physical and spiritual experience. Hence, the individual believer’s communion with Christ can become a living reality rather than remain a mere symbolic re-present-ation.

This example of the sempiternality of religion offers, I believe, a good answer to the question why scholars of medievalism studies find it difficult to engage in a critical (and that means “historicizing”) discussion of religion. Most of us may feel comfortable with dissecting Michael Crichton’s narrative device of the multiverse which, in his 1999 science-fiction novel, *Timeline*, enables twentieth-century scientists to experience the “real” Middle Ages by moving back and forth between two parallel historical periods. Religion, however, because it resists historicity’s epistemological predominance, may remain too complex a topic for most academic scholars.<sup>9</sup>

In her article, “An Academic Among the Pews,” Carla Arnell, who teaches medievalism and early English literatures at Lake Forest University, explains how she manages to inhabit two apparently mutually exclusive subject positions as scholar and Christian.<sup>10</sup> Among her reasons for balancing the demands of academic temporality and Christian sempiternality are that a) she worships regularly out of a desire “to give thanks to the divine source of all life—what Dante calls ‘the love that moves the sun and other stars;’” b) “because the formal words and music, the ritual seasons, and the constant practice of religious conformity make life beautiful;” and c) because of the “link between past and present [...], that last invisible tie religion makes possible.”

Arnell probably speaks for a good number of practitioners of medievalism studies, especially those who find a habitat in which the paradox of historicist temporality and religion does not lead to conflict, but rather yields a rich harvest of academic study. More often than not, these colleagues are guided by the scholars who lived similarly seemingly paradoxical lives, like C. S. Lewis, and find an intellectual habitat in journals accepting of religious belief as part of academic discourse, like *Christianity and Literature*. And there is also space and work for those who, unlike Arnell, reveal those continuing ritual, liturgical, and cultural ties not as “beautiful,” but as powerful obstacles to ending some of the religious traditions which developed when Christianity’s all-too-human involvement with history led its members and leaders astray. Based on the evidence provided by a doctoral dissertation by a student of Catholic Church History, Manfred Eder, the “Deggendorfer Gnad,” a

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<sup>9</sup> Mette B. Bruun discusses this predicament within the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Cistercian reception of St. Bernard. She reveals this reception as a synchronistic religious act, not a historicizing one. See her “A Case in which a Revitalization of Something Medieval Turned out not to be Medievalism,” in: *Falling into Medievalism*, ed. Anne Lair and Richard Utz. Special Issue of *UNIVERSITAS: The University of Northern Iowa Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*, 2.1 (2006); and “Jean Mabillon’s Middle Ages: On Medievalism, Textual Criticism, And Monastic Ideals,” in: *Early Modern Medievalisms. The Interplay between Scholarly Reflection and Artistic Production*, ed. Alicia Montoya, Sophie Romburgh, and Wim Anrooij (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 427-44.

more than 500-year-old annual pilgrimage based on an alleged “Jewish desecration” and “miracle of the host” was finally interdicted by the Bishop of Regensburg twenty-three years after the end of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>11</sup> Eder demonstrated conclusively how late medieval citizens and clergy had colluded in fabricating the legend, and how highly effective religion-based re-present-ation techniques, including the annual processions, indulgences, rituals, music, plays, etc., had so deeply and lastingly shaped the small Bavarian town’s identity that it took more than 200 years, from the first critical voices during the Enlightenment until 1992, to make it cease.

And so it clearly matters that we, as scholars of medievalism studies, make religion, at least in its temporal manifestations, an integral (and not merely an integrated) part of our investigations.

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<sup>11</sup> Manfred Eder, *Die “Deggendorfer Gnad”. Entstehung und Entwicklung einer Hostienwallfahrt im Kontext von Theologie und Geschichte* (Passau: Passavia, 1992).