

MEDIEVAL SPIRITUALITY AND LITURGY AS A SOURCE FOR CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

Frans Van Liere

INTRODUCTION

Medieval spirituality and medieval liturgy are vast but often untapped resources for modern liturgical practice. In contemporary Protestant and Evangelical circles, medieval Christianity has often been regarded with suspicion due to the anti-Catholic rhetoric that accompanied the Protestant Reformation. The liturgical and spiritual practices of the medieval church have been regarded as too clerical, too ritualistic, or simply too Roman Catholic. Such sentiments, however, overlook the rich diversity of medieval religious belief and practice and neglect the vast contributions of medieval laypeople, especially women, to the Christian spiritual tradition. Medieval Christianity stood at the root not only of traditions that today are associated with Roman Catholicism, such as praying the rosary and venerating the saints, but also of many of the lay practices of the Reformation, such as devotional reading and preaching. Indeed, modern Protestant and Evangelical Christians have recently rediscovered and embraced some of the medieval rituals and spiritual practices from which the Roman Catholic Church has sought to distance itself after the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. Exploring the medieval tradition, then, can be a powerful incentive for ecumenical understanding for mainstream Protestants, Evangelicals, and Roman Catholics alike and an enriching experience for contemporary Christian worshippers.

This essay explores the relevance of medieval spirituality and liturgy for modern Christians who seek to explore the roots of their traditions. For the purpose of this essay, “Middle Ages” denotes the centuries between the fifth-century decline of the Roman Empire in the West and the early sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. This guide will focus mainly on developments in the Western church.

This study has three parts. The first part will give special attention to monasticism and mystical traditions. The second part will explore liturgical practice, including private devotions, such as the Liturgy of the Hours. The final section will discuss the use of the Bible, its interpretation, and its use in worship and preaching. Related topics, such as hymnography, pilgrimage, church architecture, and the use of sacred space, will also be discussed. The treatment of this vast terrain is by no means exhaustive, but the attached bibliography provides some starting points for further research.

PART 1: SPIRITUALITY

Medieval spirituality includes the rich tradition of monastic asceticism, but the surprising number of writings by laypeople, including women, defies the preconception that medieval

Christianity was predominantly male and monastic. Both lay and monastic writings can be a rich source for modern Christian reflection.

The Monastic Tradition

Medieval monasticism is commonly defined by the Rule of Benedict, the rule for monks ascribed to this saintly sixth-century Italian abbot. Benedict's Rule advocated a communal life of humility, simplicity, and obedience under the strict guidance of an abbot. By the eighth century the Benedictine Rule had been widely adopted and was virtually the only monastic rule in Western Christendom. But before then there was a large degree of regional variation. The most distinctive regional tradition—one enjoying considerable popular interest today—is the Irish/Celtic monastic tradition represented by spiritual authors such as Patrick and Columbanus, who both propagated their own monastic rules. Unlike the Benedictine Rule, which emphasized *stabilitas* (staying in one monastery for the duration of one's life), Irish monks developed a theology of peregrination, or continuous pilgrimage, which they dubbed "white martyrdom" to distinguish it from red martyrdom (giving one's life for the faith) and green martyrdom, (penitential practices of fasting and other forms of self-denial).¹ A central element in the theology of these Celtic monks was the emphasis on penitence and confession, an aspect that was to influence Western Christendom deeply, but that was later condemned by the Protestant reformers.

In contrast to the Irish tradition, the Benedictine monks made a lifelong commitment to staying in one monastery and vowed strict obedience to the abbot of that monastery. Because Saint Benedict envisioned each monastery as independent, under the governance of an abbot elected by the monks, the rule allowed for local and regional adaptations known as "customs." Some of these customs became the basis for independent monastic orders. These new orders often called for stricter adherence to the monastic rule in movements of monastic reform. One such order, that of Cluny in Burgundy, founded in the tenth century, was known for its elaborate liturgy and its emphasis on the beauty of art and architecture in the service of divine worship. The twelfth-century abbot of one of France's leading Cluniac abbeys, Abbot Suger of Saint Denis outside Paris, is credited with creating the first truly Gothic church, inspired by the idea that created beauty is a mirror of God's immanence in this world, and religious art a reflection of God's creative action.

Later reform movements based on the Benedictine Rule rejected the Cluniac vision and stressed simplicity, poverty, and service to God in the form of hard corporeal labor. The Cistercians, named for the monastery of Cîteaux in Burgundy founded in 1098, deemphasized the use of art, and their unadorned architecture resembles the later Calvinist attitude toward art and architecture. Instead, they emphasized self-examination and a personal spirituality focused on the relationship between the soul and the suffering but resurrected Christ. Their

¹ The oldest source for this notion is the eighth-century Cambrai Homily, translated by Whitley Stokes and John Strachan in *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus*, Vol. 2:244 (Cambridge University Press, 1903).

spirituality deeply influenced later movements, such as the Franciscans. The Cistercian tradition gave rise to a number of contemplative writings, especially in the twelfth century, with notable authors such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), William of Saint Amour (1200–1272), Gueric of Saint Quentin (fl. 1245), and Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167).

Besides the Rule of Benedict, other rules, such as the Rule of Saint Augustine, were also popular. Augustinians are usually referred to as regular canons rather than monks. One foundation that followed the Augustinian Rule was the Abbey of Saint Victor near Paris, with notable members including Hugh of Saint Victor (1096–1141) and Richard of Saint Victor (1110–1173), who sought to combine a life dedicated to learning and scholarship with spiritual pursuits and contemplation. Other monastic reformers took the Rule of Augustine to create new monastic movements, such as the Premonstratensians or the Order of Sempringham. An interesting facet of these reform movements was their inclusion of women (creating sometimes “double” monasteries, for men and women alike), which initially was not a concern of the early Cistercians.

The most radical monastic innovation of the high Middle Ages was no doubt the founding of the two major mendicant orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans, named “mendicant” (“begging”) for their emphasis on individual (not just collective) poverty and their dependence on charity rather than work for sustenance. Founded by the Italian Francis of Assisi and the Spaniard Domingo de Guzmán, in 1209 and 1215 respectively, these orders emphasized an apostolic ideal of preaching and active evangelization. While the Franciscans and Dominicans thus embraced an active life, other reform movements of the twelfth century emphasized a more contemplative life. Medieval authors usually identified these two aspects of following Christ with Martha and Mary, respectively, listening to Christ in Luke 10:38–42. An enduring example of the latter is the Carthusian order, founded by Bruno of La Chartreuse (1030–1101). (Its customs were written down by his successor Guigo I of La Chartreuse, 1083–1136). With their emphasis on solitary prayer, silence, and meditation, “Charterhouses” became a fixture of many medieval cities.

While some monastic orders such as the Cistercians seemed sensitive to the need for participation by the (non-monastic) laity, the moment for lay spirituality would not come until the thirteenth century and after. The Franciscans and Dominicans stimulated lay participation through their so-called “third orders,” which encouraged laypersons to follow certain aspects of the rule (such as reciting the Divine Office and leading a life of simplicity and poverty) while maintaining their nonreligious status. Many women especially availed themselves of this opportunity. The late thirteenth century saw a rise in communities of men and women whose members took certain vows short of taking full monastic vows. They were called Beghards (in the case of men), and Beguines (women). The supervision and oversight of Beghards and Beguines was at times a matter of concern for the church authorities, especially after some of them, most notably the mystic Marguerite of Porete (d. 1310), had brushes with the Medieval Inquisition for alleged heresies. Another late-medieval reform movement that straddled the gap between religious orders and laypeople was the *Devotio moderna*, represented in the order of the Brethren (and Sisters) of the Common Life. Well-known authors in this movement were

Geert Groote (1340–1384), Geert Zerbolt van Zutphen (1367–1398), and Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), whose works (especially Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*) are still considered spiritual classics.

The Mystical Tradition

Mysticism, the intimate relationship between the individual and the divine, is hard to define. Some definitions, such as the dissolving of self in the infinite unity of God, may do justice to certain aspects of the mystical tradition, but they leave behind the more specific Christ-centered devotion that also characterized Christian mystical traditions. When people today speak of mysticism, they usually refer to the apophatic tradition, also called the *via negativa*. Since the infinite being of God defies definitive description, this tradition holds that human beings can speak of God only in negative terms, defining the divinity only by what it is not rather than making any positive descriptive statements.

The Christian tradition of apophatic mysticism was deeply influenced by Platonic philosophy, especially in its Neoplatonist form. For example, *The Enneads*, a collection of the writings of third-century philosopher Plotinus, expressed the idea that God emanates his being into this creation in a way similar to light shining into darkness. By following the traces of God in creation upward, one can eventually achieve unity with the fullness of God’s being. In the early Middle Ages, the work of Dionysius the Areopagite (late fifth century to early sixth century A.D.) was heavily influenced by the theology of Plotinus; this work was often commented on by later authors such as John Scotus Eriugena (815–877). In the later Middle Ages, the Dominican scholar Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) and his students, such as Henry Suso (1295–1366), Richard Rolle (1290–1349) and the author of the anonymous fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing*, were representatives of the apophatic tradition of mysticism.

Another strain of Christian mysticism centered on the second person of the Trinity. This type of mysticism emphasized devotion to the humanity and suffering of Christ. Adherents saw this as an opportunity to deny the self, thereby coming closer to Christ’s divinity. This devotional mysticism appears in Cistercian authors such as Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard also wrote a series of sermons on the Song of Songs, which he interpreted as a spiritual union between the human soul (the bride) and Christ (the bridegroom). This devotional strand of mysticism continued in Francis of Assisi, the first Christian to celebrate Christmas with the creation of a nativity scene to celebrate the mystery of incarnation and one of the few saints to receive in his body the stigmata—visible signs of the wounds of Christ signifying his complete identification with the suffering Christ.

Women Mystics

Some of the greatest mystics of the medieval tradition were women. The work of the influential Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) deserves mention here, as does the work of the cloistered laywoman Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), who in *The Revelations of Divine Love* vividly describes the religious experiences she had while sick as a child. Later laywomen,

including Beguines Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210–1280) and Hadewijch of Brabant (fl. 1200), described the love they felt for the Divine in sometimes vividly erotic terms. Both left a rich oeuvre of mystical poetry. Some Beguines such as Marguerite Porete, mentioned above, were under suspicion of the Medieval Inquisition for their association with the Heresy of the Free Spirit.

Whether lay or monastic, male or female, the medieval period knew many spiritual writers, making it a rich site for the exploration of Christian mysticism. While the Western Christian tradition has been sometimes characterized as spiritually poor, the medieval spiritual tradition can easily prove this judgment wrong.

PART 2: LITURGY

Time and place are essential to understanding medieval liturgy. In the liturgical calendar, specific events are always celebrated at specific times within an annual cycle. In addition, liturgy is often connected to a specific sacred space (such as a specific church, which could have its own calendar of ecclesiastical feast days). The sanctity of a place was often connected to the celebration of the lives of the saints, whose tombs or relics were contained within the church building. The most celebrated of these sites could become popular as sites of pilgrimage. These relics meant that saints were perceived as being especially present in certain places; their physical presence on earth in the form of relics established a connection to their spiritual presence around the throne of God.

Medieval liturgy was organized by an annual calendar, which commemorated theologically important historical events at specific times of the year in a recurring cycle of feasts and liturgical seasons. Three factors determined the course of the calendar: (1) the weekly celebration of Sunday; (2) the two major feasts of Christmas and Easter, as well as their related minor feasts and periods of preparation and fasting; and (3) the feast days of the saints and local feasts (for instance, the commemoration of a patron saint or the date of the elevation of his relics to the altar). Many of these feasts were public feasts, and thus these “Holy Days” became “holidays,” days of leisure and celebration for most of the population.

The medieval liturgical calendar was organized around two major feasts: Christmas, which celebrated Christ’s birth, and Easter, which celebrated Christ’s resurrection. Unlike Christmas, which since the fourth century was celebrated on a fixed date on the solar calendar (December 25), Easter was a “movable feast” that derived its date from the Jewish solar/lunar calendar and was calculated by two variables: the spring equinox and the lunar cycle. At the Synod of Whitby in 664, the Roman custom of celebrating Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox was universally adopted in the Western medieval church. These two feasts determined the calendar for the minor feasts, such as Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Pentecost, and Trinity (a fourteenth-century addition to the calendar); periods of preparation and abstinence, such as Sexagesima or Advent; and times of fasting, such as Lent.

Before the sixteenth century, liturgical practice varied from region to region. Rome followed the Roman Rite, Milan followed the Ambrosian Rite, and Christians in Spain under Muslim rulers followed their own liturgy, the Mozarabic Rite, which dated in part back to the time that Spain had been ruled by the Visigoth kings in the seventh century. Large parts of Europe celebrated the liturgy according to the Gallican Rite, which originated in France in the fifth century, while in England, the Sarum Rite (established in the eleventh century) was common. All these rites distinguished between two kinds of worship services: the celebration of the Eucharist (the Mass), and the ritual of daily prayer (the Liturgy of the Hours, also called the Divine Office).

The Shape of the Eucharist

The liturgy of the Mass was in place well before the Middle Ages, but it developed further in the medieval period. Mass began with preparatory prayers (such as the *Kyrie*, “Lord, have mercy”), followed by readings from the Scriptures, usually followed by the reading of a homily or even a preached sermon. Then came the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, or the Eucharist. In the ancient church, non-baptized members of the community (the *catechumens*) were not allowed to attend this part of the Mass and would be led out of the sanctuary just before the celebration of this sacred ritual. But they were allowed to attend the part of the liturgy intended for their instruction into the Christian faith: the Service of the Word. Depending on the local tradition, there could be two Bible readings (as in the Roman Rite) or three (as in the Ambrosian and Gallican Rites), and these normally included readings from the Old Testament, the Epistles, and the Gospels, often alternating with a sung psalm.

It is hard to tell how frequently the laity in the Middle Ages attended Mass. At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, Pope Innocent III admonished the laity to take communion at least once annually² and to prepare for this by going to confession, but it is impossible to tell what actual Mass attendance was. It was quite common for Christians to attend Mass without actually partaking in communion.

Despite infrequent lay participation in the Eucharist, the Middle Ages placed great emphasis on the celebration of the Eucharist as one of the main mysteries through which human beings became participants in the salvation of God established in Christ. There were a number of theological debates on the Eucharist in the Middle Ages, most notably between the monks Radbertus and Ratramnus in the ninth century and between Berengar of Tours and Lanfrank of Bec in the twelfth. These debates eventually led to the development of the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine and the theology of the transubstantiation as formulated by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). This led to a great veneration for the elements of the Eucharist as the body and blood of Jesus Christ, albeit with a

²Lateran IV, Canon 21. Online at <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp>.

corresponding reluctance to partake of these elements; many medieval believers contented themselves with viewing the elements instead. This veneration led to the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi (the body of Christ) in 1264.

Hymnography

While Christians often think of the Middle Ages as the period of flourishing of plainchant (commonly called Gregorian chant after Gregory the Great, although the tradition as well as many of the melodies are older than that), few people realize that the singing of hymns was a fourth-century liturgical development that flourished in the Middle Ages. Some famous medieval hymns that became regular parts of the liturgy were the *Dies Irae* and the *Stabat Mater*, both anonymously written but often set to music by a variety of Western composers. Many of the medieval melodies of these hymns have been preserved, including Thomas Aquinas's *Adoro Te Devote* and the anonymously composed *Conditor Alme Siderum*.

Hymnography, the writing of hymns, reached great heights both in quality and quantity during the medieval period. However, late-medieval liturgical reforms banned most hymns from the liturgy at the time of Boniface VIII (1294–1303), and the genre had to wait until the time of the Protestant Reformation to undergo a renaissance. While the modern word “hymn” is sometimes applied to any liturgical poetry set to music, in the medieval tradition, the terminology varied according to its place in the liturgy. Hymns in the strict sense were sung only during the Liturgy of the Hours, while during Mass, they were called sequences and tropes. Some credit the church father Ambrose, bishop of Milan (340–397), with popularizing this liturgical form. In his *Confessions*, Augustine recalls being deeply moved by the sequences Ambrose used in the liturgy in Milan. One of Ambrose's most famous hymns is *Aeterne Rerum Conditor*.

In the early medieval period, Prudentius (348–413; author of *Corde Natus ex Parentis*, “Of the Father's Love Begotten”) and Coelius Sedulius (fifth century; author of *A Solis Ortus Cardine*) continued the Ambrosian tradition. In the Carolingian period, the hymns of Theodulph of Orleans (750–821), Hrabanus Maurus (780–856; possibly the author of the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*), and Notker Balbulus (840–912; author of *Natus ante Saecula*) especially stand out.

In the twelfth century, Latin poetry flourished due to a renewed interest in classical sources. This period was the height of medieval hymnography, with music ranging from the beautiful hymns of Peter Abelard (1079–1142; *O Quanta Qualia*) to the numerous sequences of Adam of Saint Victor (1112–1146). Adam was possibly one of the most prolific hymn writers of the Middle Ages. In the thirteenth century, the contributions of Thomas Aquinas cannot go unmentioned (*Adoro Te Devote*; *Lauda Sion Salvatorem*). The music of Hildegard of Bingen serves as a reminder that not all medieval hymn writers were men.

In the nineteenth century a modest interest in the accomplishments of medieval hymn writers led to the translation of many of these hymns into English and the adaptation to modern hymn

tunes. But today the accomplishments of many of these great poets are largely forgotten and waiting to be rediscovered.

Liturgical Prayer

Prayer at fixed regular times has always been a monastic practice. The Rule of Benedict describes the main “labor” of the monk as what today is called the Liturgy of the Hours, the *Opus Dei* (“Work of God”), or the Divine Office. It involves praying at the canonical hours seven times a day. The exact times of day and the names of these prayers (such as Matins and Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, Noon, Vespers, and Compline) could vary from one liturgical custom to another. Some orders abbreviated these hours or reduced their number for practical purposes.

These prayers focused on the recitation of the psalms with added prayers, occasional hymns, and selected Bible readings. While most of these prayers of the Office were prayed collectively by the entire monastic community, the mendicant orders often adapted their prayers for private use “on the road.” Members who could not attend the daily office read the psalms in private from a breviary (*Breviarium*, meaning “brief compendium”). This more private practice eventually gave rise to the lay prayer of the hours.

Hours for the Laity

Since the early Middle Ages, laypersons were encouraged to pray privately, relying on the basic prayer structure set forth in the Divine Office. Recommended forms of prayer included reciting psalms and other Bible readings. By the thirteenth century, prayer books called Books of Hours had become common among the laity; they had their start in the recitation of the “Little Office of the Virgin Mary”—psalms, canticles, and prayers dedicated to the Virgin Mary—at particular times of the day. This “Little Office” started as a monastic devotion, but it became the daily lay devotion par excellence.

The psalms of the Hours of the Virgin gave the reader the occasion throughout the day to commemorate moments from Mary’s life, such as the annunciation of Christ’s birth, the visitation of Elizabeth, and the nativity. In addition, the Books of Hours contained the seven penitential psalms, the Litany of the Saints (a long intercessory prayer addressing a large number of saints), and the Office of the Dead (prayers for the deceased). A calendar at the beginning of the book indicated which prayers were appropriate for which liturgical season or feast days. Books of Hours could also include short gospel lessons, called sequences, that focused on the birth and passion of Christ. Some also contained a variety of personal prayers for use at certain occasions and which sometimes carried indulgences (papal guarantees of forgiveness) varying from a few days’ release from the fire of purgatory to complete forgiveness of sins.

Books of Hours could sometimes be lavishly illustrated and could become status symbols, intended to showcase the owner’s economic status as much as his or her piety. But more modest prayer books were also owned by pious men and women of humbler means. Many of

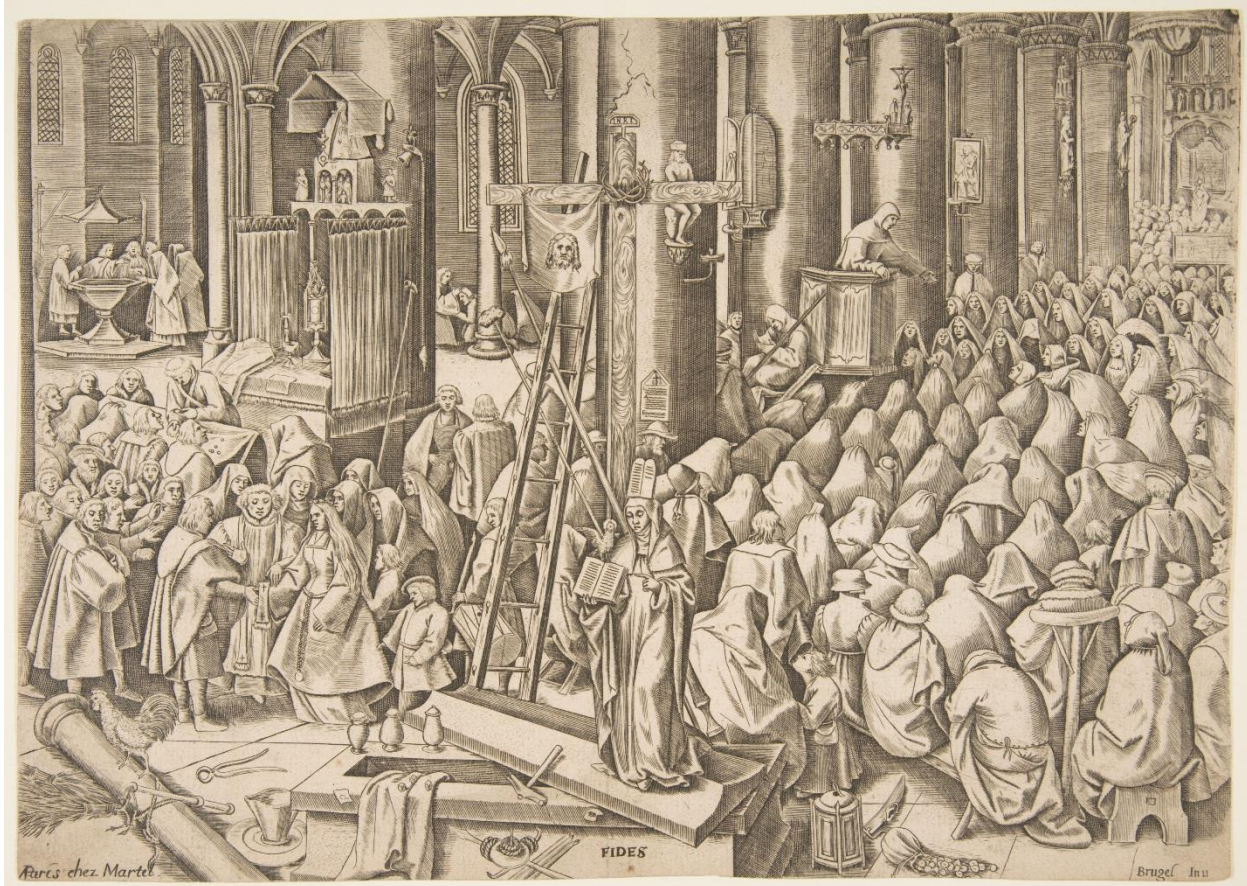
these Books of Hours were made for women (a tell-tale sign is the female grammatical forms of many of the Latin prayers); interestingly, most of them were completely in Latin, challenging the notion that educated laypersons did not read Latin. At the same time, however, translations of the Hours also were available in vernacular languages. Under the influence of the *Devotio moderna*, for instance, the Book of Hours was translated into Dutch.

Liturgical Theater

Apart from Christmas pageants usually staged by children, in most churches today theater does not play a major role in worship. This was different in the Middle Ages, when the liturgy itself was enhanced by theatrical performances and biblical stories often were the topic of theater productions outside the church, in the town squares and streets, aimed at entertainment and edification alike.

The first fully recorded liturgical drama is the *Quem Quaeritis* (*Whom do you seek?*), a short drama about the events of Easter morning, written in tenth-century England. England was probably not the only place where this kind of liturgical drama was performed. In some medieval European churches we can still see the sepulcher—a small square building in a church’s nave—where this play was staged. Full-sized statues of Jesus on a donkey, which could be pulled along on wheels, are indications that Palm Sunday was celebrated with a ceremonial procession reenacting Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem. They remind us that medieval liturgy could literally be quite dramatic.

Not all medieval biblical drama was liturgical. Some theater plays inspired by biblical stories were not intended to be part of worship services but were performed outside the churches, usually outdoors, and in the vernacular rather than in Latin. These biblical dramas were often sponsored by the cities’ guilds. On the feast of Corpus Christi, which fell on the Thursday after the feast of Trinity (the Sunday after Pentecost), usually in June, medieval cities customarily staged a procession in which the sacrament was carried reverentially through town. In several cities, these processions included a series of acted-out biblical scenes. Specially made wagons functioned as portable theaters on which the guilds of the town staged consecutive plays aiming to depict the entire biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. Such biblical plays were called “mystery plays”— probably not to indicate mystery but named after the guilds, or “misteries,” that produced them. One of the most fully preserved and expansive examples comes from York, England. Banned in the sixteenth century during the reign of Elizabeth I, the tradition of staging these plays in the city streets was revived in 1951 and continues today.



Philippe Galle, engraving after Pieter Breughel the Elder, *The World of Seven Virtues: Faith*.

An allegory of Faith. The allegorical figure of Ecclesia (Church) is surrounded by the instruments of Christ's passion (the "arms of Christ"). Several sacraments are depicted: eucharist, baptism, confession, and marriage, but the largest part of the print show a preacher on a pulpit addressing his audience.

<http://www.metmuseum.org>

PART 3: THE BIBLE

In the Middle Ages, Bible reading was an important part of the liturgy. The Bible was read, of course, in the liturgies of the Mass and of the Divine Office. But Benedict encouraged monks to set time apart for the meditative reading of the Bible and other spiritual texts (such as the lives of the saints or Patristic homilies) even outside of liturgical occasions, aiming to further the monks' spiritual understanding. This reading was considered akin to prayer. This section will first discuss the use of the Bible in the liturgy proper, including the development of the lectionary and *lectio continua*, and then address the practice of monastic reading, sometimes called *lectio divina*. Finally, it will discuss the medieval interpretation of the Bible.

The Bible in the Liturgy

Since the time of the early church Scripture reading has been an integral part of the Christian liturgy. In the earliest centuries these Scripture readings were usually “continuous”—one entire book was read from beginning to end over successive Sundays. As was customary in the synagogue, the books would vary by season. During Advent, for instance, the readings included selections from the prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel), while the Acts of the Apostles were read in the period after Easter until Pentecost. Starting in the fourth century with Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386), it became more common to read selective passages that related specifically to the liturgical season. *Lectio continua* survived in the Divine Office, especially during the Night Office. However, a more calendar-sensitive practice was to become widespread in the Western church, with the selections gradually being shortened to include only brief sections of select Bible books. Readings during Mass commonly included a selection from the Old Testament, the epistles, and the gospels, alternated with psalms and antiphons. Sometimes Bible reading was from the large codices common in the medieval period, but more often used were specialized liturgical books called lectionaries that contained only the specific readings needed for each Sunday. The use of season-specific readings helped to establish the liturgical calendar as an annual cycle commemorating the mystery of redemption.

Lectio Divina and Spiritual Reading

In today's parlance, *lectio divina* is often presented as an ancient monastic practice. However, what today is often practiced as *lectio divina*—a semi-liturgical, prayerful, slow reading of a biblical text alternated with periods of silence and prayer—is a relatively recent phenomenon. In medieval parlance, *lectio divina* simply meant the reading of Scripture. This could be done either in a liturgical setting (see above) or in a personal setting. The Rule of Benedict recommended nighttime and afternoon as the best times for personal Bible reading.

How this personal reading should best be done was the topic of frequent reflection among medieval authors. Modern authors developing the *lectio divina* as a personal liturgy draw inspiration from the phenomenology of reading developed by Guigo II the Carthusian (d. 1193), who in his *Scala Claustralium (The Ladder of Monks)* distinguished four steps in this reading: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Guigo drew his inspiration from Hugh of Saint

Victor, who described Scripture reading as an elaborate process starting with forming the words and concepts (*littera*), then finding the overt meaning (*sensus*), and finally discerning the deeper meaning (*sententia*). Through reflection, this reading should lead to contemplation. It was not complete without action, however. The authors saw these stages not as formalized liturgical actions, but instead as a personal process one should go through to make sure the reading of texts contributed to one's spiritual edification.

Although these authors envisioned the reading of Scripture as a personal act rather than a new liturgical form, medieval authors, with their emphasis on contemplation as an outcome of reading, can counter the modern trend of superficial reading and encourage modern Christians to slow down and ponder the multiple meanings of Scripture as a source for enriching one's faith and prayer life.

Medieval Biblical Interpretation

Medieval authors agreed that the Bible does not always say what it says, at least not always in straightforward ways. Scripture's literal sense was not necessarily its true meaning. To understand what the Bible truly said, one needed to read beyond its primary, obvious sense. The Bible was one extended metaphor—a Great Code—that mystically referred to a higher truth. Medieval authors commonly referred to this interpretative principle by citing the Apostle Paul: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Cor. 3:6).

In understanding the Bible, medieval authors distinguished several levels of meaning. There was a literal or historical sense, but also a mystical or spiritual sense. The text could also be read as conveying a simple moral lesson; this was called the moral or sometimes the tropological sense. A final sense, the allegorical or spiritual sense, was sometimes divided into two distinct meanings. In the words of Thomas Aquinas, it could refer either to the church militant, on earth, or to the church triumphant, in heaven.³ While the first of these was called the allegorical sense, the latter was referred to as the anagogical sense. The city of Jerusalem, for instance, could be interpreted on four levels, according to one of the monastic fathers, John Cassian:

One and the same Jerusalem can be taken in four senses: historically as the city of the Jews; allegorically as Church of Christ, anagogically as the heavenly city of God "which is the mother of us all," tropologically, as the soul of man, which is frequently subject to praise or blame from the Lord under this title (Ps. 147:12).⁴

³Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibet* VII, q. 6, art. 2, co.

⁴John Cassian, *Conferences*, 2.14.8. Online at Christian Ethereal Classics Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/cassian/conferences.iii.v.viii.html>

At the same time, perhaps as a precaution against an overly free-flowing and associative interpretation of Scripture, some authors, most notably Hugh of Saint Victor, emphasized that all reading of Scripture should be grounded in its historical sense. This historical understanding of the actual events that the Bible described—the storyline of God’s creation and salvation—was the foundation on which all other meanings rested. With this emphasis on the historical narrative as the basis for the theological interpretation of Scripture, Hugh picked up a theological notion first proposed by Augustine and echoed in the work of Thomas Aquinas, who stated that “there is nothing contained under the spiritual sense necessary for the faith that Scripture does not also treat plainly elsewhere in its literal sense.”⁵ A word of caution should be added here, however. Hugh of Saint Victor’s renewed attention to the importance of the historical sense did not mean that he abandoned the allegorical sense; he still regarded this as a source of higher, more contemplative insight into the meaning of the biblical text. Furthermore, Hugh’s and Aquinas’s ideas of what constituted “literal” do not always correspond to a modern historical-critical understanding of that same passage.

Medieval hermeneutics are often scorned by modern Christians. The prevailing sentiment is that medieval biblical interpretation is at best quaint, perhaps even interesting in an outlandish kind of way, but hardly relevant for modern believers. However, the study of the medieval tradition of interpretation should make us aware that the modern historical-critical way of reading the Bible has its limitations. Without denying the importance of literal/historical Bible interpretation (something that most medieval writers would not deny either), a model allowing for different “levels” of interpretations might invite creativity and flexibility in dealing with the Biblical text and engage modern Christians in a way that is not just rational and cerebral, but also imaginative and creative.

Medieval Preaching

Many modern Protestants mistakenly believe that preaching in the Middle Ages was either infrequent or entirely in Latin, so that no one could understand it. In reality, preaching was one of the most widespread, frequent, and well-attended activities of the medieval church, especially during the later Middle Ages. While of course the liturgy was mostly in Latin, clergy were nonetheless compelled to address their flock in the vernacular and did so at regular intervals. Because the Middle Ages span a period of almost a thousand years, there is tremendous variety in the genre of sermons.

Sermons were usually delivered in churches, during the worship service. But sermons could also be preached on special occasions and outside churches. Some sermons were given by wandering preachers and were aimed at raising religious enthusiasm among large crowds at revivalist meetings. The Franciscans and the Dominicans especially trained their members to be effective preachers to assist the clergy in their duty of instructing the laity. Some late-medieval preachers could easily attain celebrity status. Preachers like Berthold of Regensburg (1210–

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.10, ra. 1.

1272) and Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444), for instance, were hugely popular in their time. Other sermons were specifically preached for learned audiences. Preaching was one of the regular scholarly activities at medieval universities, and students were required to attend. Sermons were also preached to monks during the time after dinner, which was set apart for reflection and learning.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the medieval traditions of spirituality and liturgy can enrich contemporary Christian worshippers. Some examples may suffice here. With their emphasis on the experience of God in nature, Celtic spiritual authors may offer modern Christians a precedent for the theological importance of creation care. The theology of Francis of Assisi may be attractive for similar reasons. The tradition of spiritual self-examination within the twelfth-century Cistercian authors can be a fruitful resource for Christian psychologists.

Some medieval spiritual practices have gained popularity in recent times. The *lectio divina* was mentioned above, but other practices, such as pilgrimage, have made a modest comeback as well. The pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostela has gained recognition even among Protestants as a deeply meaningful and transformative experience. While passion plays and processions may seem to some a relic of the medieval past, in the Netherlands, on every Maundy Thursday since 2011, a procession and passion play is performed in various cities, drawing great crowds, and [broadcast](#) on national television.

While the Protestant Reformation was generally averse to monasticism, the practice nevertheless underwent a modest revival starting in the twentieth century through centers such as [Iona](#) and [Taizé](#), which in turn also sparked a Protestant interest in the classic writers of monastic spirituality. They have much to offer for evangelical theology on topics such as Christian notions of community, friendship, and the practice of hospitality.

The study of medieval liturgy can make Christian worship more informed and give it more historical depth. It can fill believers with the realization that Christian worship involves not only present-day believers, but the church of all ages. Likewise, the study of the medieval reception of the Bible has much to offer for today's theology. It may lead to a more creative and imaginative form of Bible interpretation; it also reminds us that the history of the Bible does not come to a halt when the last of the gospels was written down. The Bible is a living document that not only has shaped the faith of the church but in turn was also shaped *by* the church. The study of its reception can lead us to critically reexamine the relationship between community and textual authority, tradition and revelation, and literacy and power. In other words, the church today has much to gain by the study of its medieval traditions.

SOME RECENT PUBLICATIONS⁶

Boynton, Susan, and Diane J. Reilly, eds. *The Practice of the Bible in the Western Middle Ages: Production, Reception, and Performance in Western Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

This is a multiauthor study with chapters on the history of exegesis, on the history of particular types of Bible manuscripts (the Atlantic Bibles and Paris Bibles, e.g.), and on vernacular Bibles (in English, Spanish, and French), but there are also at least four contributions that explore the relationship between Bible and liturgy. Most of the contributions are very accessible and readable, making this an excellent introduction to the topic of the medieval Bible, and an excellent complementary source to Van Liere's book, listed below.

Duffy, Eamon. *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers, 1240–1570*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

This book offers a beautifully illustrated history of the eight hundred or so prayer books extant today in English museums and library collections. Duffy is mainly interested in the marks and scribbles that readers left in these manuscripts, from heartfelt prayers to shopping lists, and reconstructs from them the mindset of the late medieval laity.

Dunn, Marilyn. *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000.

A learned but accessible and well-researched introduction to the origin and development of monasticism in the Christian church, mainly focusing on the Western church. It traces the origins of asceticism and coenobitism, and it discusses the Rule of Benedict and the emergence of Irish and British monasticism in great detail. The endpoint of this book is the seventh century.

Fassler, Margot E. and Rebecca A. Baltzer. *The Divine Office in The Latin Middle Ages: Methodology and Source Studies, Regional Developments, Hagiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Margot Fassler is an internationally recognized scholar in the field of medieval music and liturgy. This book is intended as a practical guide to this sometimes confusing and under-researched field of study. This multiauthor volume contains many studies highlighting the regional variety in and immense number of extant sources in the field, and they contain a wealth of pathbreaking research. The problem inherent to the multiauthor approach, however, is that it is perhaps less useful in giving a basic introduction for the complete beginner in the field; the studies contained herein may be too specialized for this purpose. However, many of the studies represent fresh topic choices and methodologies and may incite further research.

⁶I wish to thank the members of the medieval-religion list for all their excellent suggestions, especially Gordon Plumb, Leah Morrison, and Paul Chandler.

Foley, Edward. *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist*. Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 2008.

This is a richly illustrated and accessible book written for a wide audience. The time frame is much larger than just the Middle Ages, but this is a great resource for those who want a general introduction to the origin, development, and regional variety of the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Howe, John. *Before the Gregorian Reform: The Latin Church at the Turn of the First Millennium*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016.

Chapters 3 to 5 of this book give an excellent description of how the medieval liturgy actually worked. Researchers have given much attention to the Gregorian Reform in the eleventh century and often have painted a dark picture of the church preceding it. Howe takes an honest look at what the practices of this church looked like, stripping away the rhetoric of the later reformers.

Kroesen, Justin E. A., and Regnerus Steensma. *The Interior of the Medieval Village Church: Het Middeleeuwse Dorpskerkinterieur*. Louvain and Dudley: Peeters, 2004.

Regnerus Steensma was a pioneer in the field of how church architecture and church furnishings play a role in Christian worship and liturgy. The University of Groningen held an extensive photographic archive of the numerous village churches in northern Netherlands that Steensma collected. This book draws from an even wider collection of village churches, including some in Germany, England, and Scandinavia. In two languages and lavishly illustrated, this book is among the best of its kind.

Pfaff, Richard W. *The Liturgy in Medieval England: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

This magisterial study is a model of its kind. It is based on a thorough, lifelong study of liturgical manuscripts ranging from the Anglo-Saxon period to the late Middle Ages. It explores the liturgies of various religious orders—Benedictines, the Order of Sempringham, the Augustine Canons, the Friars, and Bridgetines—as well as the rise of the so-called “Sarum Use” in the twelfth century and its demise in the later Middle Ages.

Rubin, Miri, ed. *Medieval Christianity in Practice*. Princeton Readings in Religions. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

A volume of collected essays about a large variety in practices of Christians throughout the Middle Ages. The book comprises forty-two selections from primary source materials, each translated with an introduction and commentary by a specialist in the field. This makes this a primary choice to teach students about the variety of religious experiences and liturgical practices that constituted medieval Christianity.

Van Liere, Frans. *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*. Introduction to Religion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

This book offers an accessible introduction to the medieval Bible. It covers the physical aspects of the Bible (manuscripts), the medieval canon, biblical interpretation, the vernacular Bible, preaching and prayer, and the Bible and the medieval arts. It does not merely give an overview of secondary literature; it is based on a wide research into primary sources, both printed and manuscript.

RESOURCES

There are several good general introductions to the history of medieval spirituality, with ample bibliographies and suggestions for further research. The first book listed here addresses spirituality in a more general sense and has a more thematic than historical approach; the two-part *Christian Spirituality* offers a more historical approach.

Jones, Chelsyn, Edward Yarnold Wainwright, and Paul Bradshaw, eds. *The Study of Spirituality*. London: SPCK, 1992. Second impression with corrections. First published 1986.

McGinn, Bernard, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, eds. *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*. World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, 16. New York: Crossroad Press, 1985.

Raitt, Jill, Bernard McGinn, and John Meyendorff, eds. *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*. World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, 17. New York: Crossroad Press, 1987.

Various introductions exist to the history of monasticism. The English publisher Boydell & Brewer, for instance, has a series on the history of each individual monastic order. To date, volumes on the Benedictines (by James Clark), Cistercians (by Janet Burton and Judith Kerr), Franciscans (by Michael Robson), and 'Other Friars' (by Frances Andrews) have appeared. Many translated texts of monastic and spiritual writers can be found online at Calvin College's [Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#). Various publishers provide translation series of spiritual classics, too, such as New City Press (especially the series *Victorine Texts in Translation*) and Cistercian Publications (the *Cistercian Fathers Series*, but also more general series on Benedictines, Celts, and the Desert Fathers). The 2005 movie *Into Great Silence* paints an impressive image of Carthusian spirituality.

The Liturgy of the Medieval Church, listed below, is probably the most comprehensive and up-to-date book on medieval liturgy available. It includes sections on Byzantine liturgy and Jews in the medieval Latin liturgy, but its focus is mainly on Western Europe. It covers the liturgical year, the Divine Office, Books of Hours, liturgical vestments, manuscripts, architecture, drama, and music. Its sections are titled "The Shape of the Liturgical Year," "Particular Liturgies," "The Physical Setting of the Liturgy," "The Liturgy and Books," "Liturgy and the Arts," and "Expanding the Definition of Medieval Liturgy." Vogel's *Medieval Liturgy* is indispensable as well.

Heffernan, Thomas J., and E. Ann Matter, eds. *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005. Second edition.

Vogel, Cyrille. *Medieval Liturgy: An Introduction to the Sources*. Translated by William Storey and Niels Rasmussen. NPM Studies in Church Music and Liturgy. Washington: The Pastoral Press, 1986.

While classics such as Josef Jungmann's *The Mass of the Roman Rite* (New York: Benziger, 1951–55) and Dom Gregory Dix's *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1945) are still very useful, for a more recent introduction, see *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* or the John Harper book noted here.

Harper, John. *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: An Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Jones, Cheslyn, Edward Yarnold Wainwright, and Paul Bradshaw, eds. *The Study of Liturgy*. London: SPCK, 1992. Revised edition; first published 1978.

Wainwright, Geoffrey, and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, eds. *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

The main Latin source texts for the study of medieval liturgy include the *Ordines Romani*, the *Liber Usualis*, and Guillaume Durand's *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (all in the bibliography below). A [website](#) with resources for the study of medieval liturgy is being developed by John Romano. It includes a vast bibliography, translations of various primary texts, and a guide to other online resources.

There are several good introductions to the Divine Office. For those interested specifically in Books of Hours, the entire text of the [Book of Hours](#) is online in Latin and in English translation.

Taft, Robert. *The liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986.

For those interested in the interaction of medieval music and liturgy, the following resources are very useful:

Hiley, David. *Western Plainchant: A Handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Hughes, Andrew. *Late Medieval Liturgical Offices: Resources for Electronic Research: Sources & Chants*. Subsidia mediaevalia. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996.

There are excellent recent resources for the study of the Bible in the Middle Ages. While Van Liere offers a brief and very readable introduction with ample bibliography (above), the *New Cambridge History of the Bible* offers a comprehensive overview of the entire field, including a chapter on medieval liturgy:

Marsden, Richard, and E. Ann Matter. *The New Cambridge History of the Bible, Volume 2: From 600 to 1450*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

A vast bibliography exists on medieval preaching. However, general introductions to the topic are rare. One of the best resources is probably the *New Cambridge History of the Bible*, cited above, or the bibliography in Van Liere, also cited above.

Repertoria for Latin sermons have been created by Johann Baptist Schneyer (*Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones*) and for Middle English by Veronica O'Mara and Suzanne Paul (*A Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons*). The [International Medieval Sermon Studies Society](#) is a research group dedicated entirely to the study of medieval sermons.

For those interested in the connection between the Bible, liturgy, and art, an interactive CD-ROM with a trove of medieval images is *Images of Salvation: The Story of the Bible through Medieval Art*, edited by Dee Dyas of the [Center for the Study of Christianity and Culture](#) at York University. Two important databases of medieval religious images, searchable by iconographic themes, are invaluable resources: the [Index of Christian Art](#) and the [Warburg Institute Iconographic Database](#).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The local variety in medieval liturgy and the vast quantity of manuscript resources makes any aspect of the medieval liturgy a fruitful field of research. However, because most of this material is in Latin, proficiency in this language is a requirement for any serious study into this subject. Likewise, most of these manuscripts are unedited and written in the scripts that were peculiar to the time, so medieval paleography is a desirable skill for any student wishing to embark on the study of liturgy. On the positive side, while some decades ago a researcher still needed to visit medieval book collections and libraries, today many manuscripts are digitized and available electronically, often free of charge.

Relatively few studies have been made of late-medieval sermons, simply because the vast majority of the material is unedited. Medieval sermons were almost always delivered in the vernacular, but this does not mean that all sermons were preserved in the vernacular. A medieval preacher could work from a model sermon in Latin but preach in the vernacular. Or, a sermon preached in the vernacular could be recorded by professional scribes in Latin as its "official" version. Thus, in addition to paleography and Latin, knowledge of medieval vernaculars is desirable for this type of research.

Europe is rich in medieval churches, yet medieval church interiors often have been adapted for later liturgical demand. The study by Kroesen and Steensma, cited above, covers only a small part of what we know about the medieval church interior and its relation to Christian worship; much fieldwork still needs to be done. At the same time, new electronic media offer exciting possibilities for presenting this type of research. [Mapping Gothic France](#), a website curated by Columbia University's Stephen Murray, offers an exciting vision of what technology can offer here.

When it comes to the study of the medieval Bible and its interpretation, Van Liere (2014) offers some suggestions for further research. One serious deficiency for the study of this field is the lack of good translations of medieval texts, especially Bible commentaries, to make this field more accessible for the general public. Despite series such as *Victorine Texts in Translation*, the Cistercian Fathers series, Eerdmans's series *The Bible in the Medieval Tradition*, there is still a serious lacuna here.

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