



# Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages

*R. W. Southern*

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The concept of an ordered human society, both religious and secular, as an expression of a divinely ordered universe was central to medieval thought. In the West the political and religious community were inextricably bound together, and because the Church was so intimately involved with the world, any history of it must take into account the development of medieval society. Professor Southern's book covers the period from the eighth to the sixteenth century. After sketching the main features of each medieval age, he deals in greater detail with the Papacy, the relations between Rome and her rival Constantinople, the bishops and archbishops, and the various religious orders, providing in all a superb history of the period.

## Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages Details

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# From Reader Review *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* for online ebook

## Robert Monk says

Let's begin by saying what this book is not: it's not a history of medieval religious thought or theology. This is a history of the Church as an institution, and as a part of medieval society. And the Church was a huge part of Western society after the fall of Rome. In some ways, it was the only institution that remained intact, and even grew, the sole unifying factor in a fractured place and time. So anyone who is interested in the Middle Ages needs to know about the medieval Church.

So how is this book at being what it tries to be? It's good. R.W. Southern was a towering figure in medieval studies, author of *\*The Making of the Middle Ages\**. He organizes this survey from the top down, beginning with the medieval Papacy, moving through Bishops and other ecclesiastical lords, down to the religious orders. He puts a lot of time into the relations between the Church and secular leaders, describing the Papacy's attempt to assert leadership over society as a whole, less time on specific Popes and Bishops. It also spends less time (though it does touch upon) the problems that led to the decline of the medieval Church, and the Reformation of the sixteenth century. All in all, however, not a bad survey. Helpful for those who aren't necessarily church historians but who need a grounding for the study of the Middle Ages in general, and maybe a good starting point for those who *\*are\** interested in church history.

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## Katie says

A very well-done introduction to the history of medieval institutional religion. Since he's only working with 350-odd pages, Southern makes the good decision to not try to crazily dash around and cover all of it. Instead, he goes for a clear and concise look at the main pillars of medieval institutional religion - popes, bishops, and the most prominent orders of monks - and an examination of how they interacted with the social environment in which they operated. It's a good primer, but it also has some good depth to it - it's always fun to find an intro survey like this that doesn't talk down to its audience.

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## Siria says

R.W. Southern was a doyen of medieval history, and as such his *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* remains a good introduction to the development of ecclesiastical institutions in Western Europe. Southern writes well, never talks down to the reader, and he had a great knack for summing up a movement or an order in a deceptively simple yet revealing sentence or two. A vast reading in chronicles and cartularies is displayed in the wide range of (sometimes obscure) anecdotes which he used to illustrate his work. Of course, this is still a book conceived and largely written in the 1960s, and its ages shows in a number of aspects—women are shunted off to a small section near the end, there is talk of the end of the early medieval golden age for women religious, etc. Many of his statements about women's religion, and indeed how Southern approaches the church-as-institution have been challenged, if not overturned, by more recent scholarship. Recommended, but with reservations.

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## **Kumar Venugopal says**

A great overview of the Church from c. 700 - c. 1550. The focus and insight provided regarding how the Church in this time integrated all of life together is very beneficial. Additionally, the growth of papal power is enlightening and helps me better understand the Roman Catholic mindset. I highly recommend this book for an overview of the Church during this time.

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## **Rich Stone says**

Good overview.

History. Divided period covered 700-1550 into three subsets (700-1050, 1050-1300, and 1300-1550) and discussed general trends for each. Material was reasonably interesting but done at a very high level.

The schism. Good discussion providing insight into politics as well as doctrine that resulted in split between Roman and Eastern church.

The Papacy. Reasonably interesting overview of how the papacy started out associated primarily with the apostle Peter before evolving into the "Vicar of Christ". Also good discussion of how the popes were drawn into issues at such a low level they hardly had time for providing visionary leadership.

Bishops and Archbishops. Discussed the senior members of the church hierarchy and their relationship with Rome as well as with local secular leaders. Used a few specific examples from England, France, Germany.

Religious Orders. I thought this was the best section of the book. Compared and contrasted the various orders of Monks and Friars and gave insight into how they fit into Medieval society based on what was going on in society at large.

Fringe Orders. Thought a bit too many pages were spent in this area covering somewhat obscure orders. You could see method to the madness as these orders (Beguines, Deventers, etc.) were characterized by individual service to God largely independent from "the Church". This change in focus is one of many precursors to the reformation.

All in all I found it interesting but would hesitate to recommend it to someone unless they already have an interest in the subject matter.

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## **Jan-Maat says**

Rereading this I wondered who the intended reader was meant to be, perhaps if one could seize on that elusive person Southern's choice of material and organisation of the book would become clear.

From the first the difficulty involved in writing a book like this is clear. It is of a series, following on from The Early Church and followed by a volume on the Reformation - this requires Southern to cover over a

thousand years of history in 360 pages. The way that Southern decided to deal with that massive spread of time and space is bizarre. During this period Western Christianity expanded in the British Isles, Scandinavia, all of Europe east of the Rhine, retreated from and then reconquered the Iberian peninsula, conquered and then lost the Holy Lands and sent missions to the Mongols, China and North Africa none of which one would be aware of from Southern's book (you might want to reach for *The Conversion of Europe* if any of that tickles your fancy). While at the same time within the Church as an institution there were dramatic changes, perhaps none more so than the Papacy becoming the pre-eminent ecclesiastical institution in the west and the spread of priestly celibacy - the former not stated baldly and the latter isn't mentioned at all (view spoiler).

Implicitly Southern seems to be writing from a viewpoint that might be acceptable in catholic seminaries (view spoiler) - that the Papacy was pre-eminent providing leadership and direction within the Church as a whole from the start, and indeed in the section that deals with the division between the Orthodox and Catholic churches this is very much the impression given. Unfortunately this conflicts with how Southern shows that change bubbled up from various levels in the Christian community - the circle of churchmen around Charlemagne for the addition of *filioque* to the creed, the development of monasticism and new forms of religious life both of which the Papacy reacted to but didn't lead, inspire or cause.

Nor does Southern appear interested in the entire period covered by his book. He is far more comfortable discussing the Church from the eleventh century onwards and has the most to say about western Christianity in Northern Italy, France, England, Western Germany and the low countries from about the twelfth century through to the end of the fourteenth. Areas geographically beyond that get one or at most two entries which are overwhelmingly about the spread of the Cistercians or the Friars (view spoiler). Spain gets an extra mention on account of some Abbesses who preached, took confessions and undertook the benediction of their own nuns. This predilection for a tight geographical area and a limited time period comes to a head in the case studies he chooses for his discussion of Bishops - all of which are from the thirteenth century, two of which were appointed by the pope in the context of the struggle against the Emperor Frederick II. This provides a very restricted view of what it was to be a bishop in medieval western Europe.

Despite the focus on the thirteenth century in particular I don't think that this book has much to offer somebody who had just read *The Name of the Rose* and was curious to find out a little more about monasteries, friars and heresy.

A history of the Church has to opt to be either a history of the community of the faithful or a history of the institution. Southern takes the latter route. The plus side of this is that this book is an introduction to the world of monasticism, the friars and the growth of the business of the papacy. The downsides are that there is no bibliography so you are on your own for the further reading that you will need to supplement this book to understand the Church in this period.

Southern splits the material thematically, there are separate sections for the Papacy, Bishops, monastic movements and so on which then breakdown into case studies. This works well in giving both a broad brush overview and individual detail. The problem is that the case studies don't cover the breath of the time period or the geographical area under consideration. Overall its an introductory book that does not intend to be completely through. It succeeds in giving an overview of developments, although one that is skewed in certain directions.

Time has not been kind to the book. A few years after Southern wrote in this book that there is something about town life that gives rise to heresy, Montaillou was published showing how deeply heresy was embedded in a rural context, ie just the opposite. I think in the light of women's history, although Southern

does give over one of his case studies to the Beguines, more would have been made of those Spanish Abbesses and their aristocratic equivalents in Anglo-Saxon England and Germany as well as the spirituality represented by Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena or Margery Kempe(view spoiler). Also I can't help thinking how the growth of the Papacy from holding power by virtue of the relics of St.Peter through becoming a court of appeal, an international mediator and bureaucratic powerhouse ties in to the kinds of developments discussed in *From Memory to Written Record*. This underlines for me how Southern's book really works best as a starting point and isn't an end in itself.

Despite the title of *Western Society and the Church* Southern turns away from the how religious life was expressed through lay group like Guilds or lay patronage in the arts and architecture (view spoiler). But again this is an area that has been developed since the publication of his book. Reading between the lines of this book the pressure from people to express their spiritual life in some way that wasn't catered for through existing church bodies was hugely important and drove the appearance of, as well as the rapid growth of new movements whether judged to be orthodox or heretical.

It is an elegantly written book, but because of the scale of the field also a very personal one, a different scholar would have inevitably taken a different approach to the topic. Still readable and still of use, it is best suited to the undergraduate as a first text to introduce them to the most visible organisations within the medieval western church, but is an inadequate introduction to the field as a whole.

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## **Tim says**

Southern's book remains an excellent historical introduction to the shaping of medieval ecclesiastical institutions by their environment (and to a lesser extent the other way as well). It has been rounded out by other deeper studies including those clever studies attempting to grasp "the large mass of inarticulate Christians" and heretical movements, but it remains a lively and thoughtful survey of medieval life from 600 to 1500. Covering political relations, relations with the East, the papacy, bishops, religious orders, and fringe movements (beguines and the brethren) he specializes in historical change and sentences that expand your understanding.

"The unity of the period from the seventh to the sixteenth century comes from the more or less effective preservation of a unity that draws its strength from the ancient world. The modern world begins when that strength, despite all the talk of humanists about the rediscovery of classical literature and culture, ebbed away."

After 1050: "The area of life directly controlled by an appeal to supernatural power was slowly and inexorably reduced. As a corollary of this, new methods and new efforts to enlarge the area of intelligibility in the world are the most prominent features of the new age.... Both secular and spiritual hierarchies, becoming more clearly distinct in their offices, developed new techniques of government and a new range of expertise."

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## **T says**

This a brief, but good overview of the Catholic Church after the break of Rome and before the reformation. It is difficult to get very specific about the history when trying to cover so much history in such small space. It is hard to get any real chronology about the time period from this book. Rather, it covers some broad themes about this time period and the church that are interesting and insightful.

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## **Edward C. says**

I'm immensely pleased with Prof. Southern's book. It is amazing how much he is able to articulate in so few pages. The trick is to know when to name players and when it is unnecessary.

Southern's addition to the Penguin History of the Church focuses on how the medieval Church (700-1550) "did business," especially between kings and popes. The book is centered around the rise of papal power and how it affected everything: the internal workings of the Western Church, how it perceived itself, its relations with secular rulers, and its relations with the Orthodox. Southern's prose is thorough and informative without being dry or overly full of data.

I should note that he breaks each part into three, based on dates: 700-1050, 1050-1300, and 1300-1550.

The final third of the text reviews the great religious orders of the Middle Ages, as well as some of the "fringe" and "anti" orders.

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## **Matthew Dambro says**

I must admit at the outset that I had an ulterior motive in finishing this volume. I was a medieval history graduate student of Dr. Norman Cantor at SUNY Binghamton in the mid-1970s. Cantor was a graduate student of Sir Richard Southern at Oxford in the mid 1950s. This was a trip back to my lost and wasted youth. I remember the seminar nights on Twelfth Century England vividly. It was a mixture of abject terror and almost indescribable exultation; sitting there with around a dozen of the best historical minds I had ever encountered. At the head of the circle of tables sat Cantor. He always impressed me as a great shaggy brown bear; huge, slow moving, seemingly oblivious to we mere mortals. But he had the weapons of a Kodiak also. He could rip and claw and devour anyone unprepared or merely ignorant. He gained these formidable tools from his experiences with Southern at Oxbridge. He was a Jew from the Western provinces of Canada competing with English aristocrats and millionaires sons. His mind was like a stainless steel trap. It had a precision and a speed and a ruthlessness that was awe inspiring. He admired Southern's work but found constant shortcomings in it. This work was dismissed as a textbook for undergraduates. For Cantor, the only work worth mentioning was Southern's Making of the Middle Ages. Actually Western Society and the Church is a very good introduction to the interior of the medieval Catholic Church. It is thematic and not chronologically oriented. It explains well the internal dynamics and emotional fabric of an institution over a thousand years. It is highly recommended. Albeit with sufficient background to understand the journey. The average history undergraduate of today wouldn't last fifty pages.

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## **Jonfaith says**

**In the late fourteenth century religious men had some shattering paradoxes and failures before their**

**eyes. The Benedictines had retreated from the world, and had become great centres of government and institutions of social cohesion. The Cistercians had gone into the wilderness, and had become the greatest organizers of economic forces before the Fuggers and Medicis. The Franciscans had dedicated their lives to poverty, and were comfortably installed in every large town in Europe. In all this, effective religion(so it seemed) was lost in superficiality.**

Dr. Southern's work affected me, it spawned an almost Pauline conversion. No, I haven't embraced the faith, but I felt my thoughts change. A shift was endeavored. Covering a thousand years in a mere 360 pages remains daunting if not impossible. That said, I tended to agree with the learned medievalist when he opines the significance of the church at such a monumental time in European history. What would've been the result if the church had failed? What other institutions could've kept the wolves of the time from the everyman's door?

The book begins with the differences between the Rome and Constantinople and all their doctrinal baggage. He then proceed to traverse the history of the papacy and follows with other offices of the church and concludes with a history of the myriad Orders and their consequent effect on the development of the West. The book is rife with anecdotes and more than a few charts and graphs. It also succeeded in altering the opinion of this crusty agnostic.

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## **Dave says**

Nothing brilliant here, but he avoids a couple of pitfalls of Medieval History

1. The old view that this was a barbaric waiting period until the Renaissance
2. Some with a positive view of the period try to correct this by showing us how all the foundations of the modern world can be found in the Medieval period.

Number 2 is closer to the truth, but is still a problem because

1. It assumes that we are farther along than they were, and
2. Does not allow us to evaluate the period on its own merits.

Southern tries to get us to understand the period on its own merits in its own context, as a system unto itself. It had strengths that we do not have, and weaknesses as well. The book essentially tells the story of how a dynamic Church could rescue the world from barbarism and then stagnate -- how the seeds of the growth and 'triumph' of the church set the stage for the 'Lawyer Popes' of the 13-14th centuries. His account is insightful and sympathetic, but by the end we see that it had to die.

The one thing he does not do (but does not claim to try and do) is to apply this to our own time. All systems have strengths, flaws, and the seeds of destruction sewn in them. We can't just wag our finger at the past, we need to apply its lessons and see how we can (or are) making the same mistakes.

He writes clearly and gives good statistical and anecdotal support in a very readable format-- a solid work.

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## **Mark says**



Good historical inquiry of the Papacy, Bishops and Monastic orders (and fringe orders) from the 11th to the 16th century. Obviously a small book can only do so much, but Southern narrows his topic well without oversimplifying. A good read for those interested in the relation of secular and sacred in the Middle ages.

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### **Victoria says**

A book that all my undergrads ought to read, if only to confront the truth that the medieval church was not, in fact, a police state. Argues that the medieval "church" referred to the ecclesiastical hierarchy rather than a community of believers, and functions as a rough sketch of the various parts of that hierarchy. Argues, however, that that hierarchy was not a coherent, cohesive one, but disparate in its design, functions, and general apparatus.

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### **Erik Graff says**

The three semester sequence of Church History courses was one of the unexpected delights in seminary, particularly Dr. Lotz' Mediaeval History. I had expected it to be dull memorization concerning what I still thought of as "the Dark Ages", that stultifying gap between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. Boy was I wrong! Well, at least the teacher and the readings he had us do were of a quality to excite my interest in the period.

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