

## **Popular Religion in the Middle Ages**

Charles St-Onge, April 10, 2001

In their book Popular Religion in the Middle Ages, Rosalind and Christopher Brooke try and uncover the popular culture of Western Europe in the period between 1000 and 1300 AD. Their work is based largely on the writings, artwork, and architecture of the period as a window into the culture of the people. Their book includes numerous photographs and images of art from the period, as well as quotes from some of the literature of the time. The book shies away from simply talking “about” the Middle Ages. It tries instead to give a flavor of the thinking of the people of the people of the medieval period in their own words and works.

The authors admit that such an undertaking is fraught with difficulties. Most of the literature from the period in question reflects the work of the literate “elite”, and may or may not reflect the culture of the largely illiterate “average person” (Brooke, 9). The authors are interested chiefly in “popular religion”, the culture of the masses, rather than the officially sanctioned beliefs and doctrine of the church or of the rulers. They strive, therefore, to get behind the architecture, art, and writings of the period, largely inspired by the cultural elite, to uncover the attitude of the rest of medieval society. This means “reading between the lines” of the art and architecture of the period, and relying heavily on writings close to or produced by the “average” inhabitant of the middle ages.

Poems, songs and obscure but likely popular writings are favored by the Brookes. Two examples of these are “The Dream of the Rood” (Brooke, 139) and “The Confession of Three Sins” (Brooke, 96). They provide insight into the personal piety of people in the medieval period. They also show friction between the “laity” and the official church, a sure sign that they represent true, though perhaps not widespread, sentiment and not merely official positions. Works such as Dante’s “Divine Comedy” also provide insight into the thinking of the people on such matters as judgement, hell, and purgatory.

The Brookes use the architecture of the churches of the period to shed light on the issue of personal piety. The use of relics of the saints in church altars and pilgrimage sites shows the incorporation of the cult of the saints into the worship life of the people. The changing of a church’s name in the popular writing, even when the church’s official name remains the same is the type of source that the Brookes find useful. For example, the cathedral at Winchester was officially dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul, but came to be known colloquially as “St. Swithun’s”, after its more powerful local saint (Brooke, 35). This is a clear example of how the miraculous powers associated with a local saint might overrule a church’s association with a more prestigious name, like St. Peter. Another example of how churches shed insight into popular religion is the preference of Canterbury over Westminster by the pilgrims, due to the former’s association with Thomas Becket (Brooke, 42). The king associated Westminster with Edward the Confessor, whose “healing abilities” and life were simply not as strong in the popular mind as the sainted Thomas.

The Brookes do not rely heavily on the “great writings” of the period in question. There is no mention whatsoever of Thomas Aquinas or his “Summa Theologica”. The theological disputes between Abelard and Anselm are ignored. There is no in-depth reporting of the important councils of the period, even of the Fourth Lateran Council. These are in no way shortcomings, for an examination of these materials would not serve the Brookes’ purposes. They have done their best to stay away from “official” documents, except when those documents might shed light on the popular beliefs of the time. The Brookes are careful to try and distinguish between what they see as the “religion of the learned” from the religion of the sailor and the merchant (Brooke, 61).

What might this approach mean for a modern historian, trying to study popular religion or culture in 20<sup>th</sup> century America? Probably the most important point is that one must be careful not to read the beliefs of a certain elite as typical of the culture at large. For example, if one were to study only the writings of the American academe, one would not have a good sense of the mindset of a typical farmer or worker in the Midwest. A historian of popular religion or culture should try and seek sources or “windows” into the people who form and live in that culture.

One possible source for popular opinion and sentiment would most certainly be “Letters to the Editor” of newspapers and magazines. These letters to local newspapers, even a newspaper of a mid-size city, and to popular religious publications (possibly “The Lutheran Witness”?) give great insight into the thinking of the “average person”. Opinion polls may possibly be another valuable source of data on what people are actually thinking or expressing. Certainly one must be careful in selecting which of these polls to use. But I personally recall a Pew Research poll that compared American and Canadian religious and political values by region that was very helpful for understanding North American cultural differences.

Yet another useful source for understanding 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture would be homes, vehicles, and furniture. The “things” that make up daily existence, like the churches of the medieval period, shed light on the underlying values of the people who own them. What do the great “fins” on the vehicles of the 1950s say about the people who purchased those cars en masse? What does the furniture of the average American say about their aesthetic values, their material wealth, or the things on which they place importance?

Lastly, one should consider however cautiously popular media as a source for understanding popular culture. The music people listen to, as well as the movies and television shows they watch can provide insight into what they are thinking. The caution here is that a chicken-and-egg effect may be occurring. Is television a reflection of people’s values, or is it ultimately shaping people’s values and their culture?

This is the problem of any attempt to understand “popular religion” or culture. The churches and architecture of the Middle Ages may have influenced medieval piety as much as television shapes ours. It may ultimately be impossible to separate the cause from the effect, because they are so intertwined. One can only examine the data, and say “here is what I see”. This is the way people were, and it is not always possible to say precisely why.