

Kimm Curran, Janet Burton (ed.), Medieval Women Religious, c. 800–c. 1500. New Perspectives, Woodbridge (Boydell & Brewer) 2023, 266 p., 8 b/w fig. (Studies in the History of Medieval Religion), ISBN 978-1-83765-029-3, EUR 68,92.

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Until well into the 20th century, women religious were often approached from a male interpretive framework, obscuring at best the nuances and distinctiveness of female religious life and experiences. Other scholars interpreted the distinctiveness of female religiosity as a sign of decline, viewing women religious as being in need of male oversight. Over the past decades, recent scholarship has shed new light on how women religious were active agents in shaping their own identity and way of living. »Medieval Women Religious, c. 800–c. 1500. New Perspectives« seamlessly aligns with this research strand. The volume brings together scholars from diverse fields, such as archaeology, history, literary studies, landscape study and material culture, providing a fresh perspective that looks beyond traditional categorizations used in earlier scholarship. Authors defy traditional labels that strictly interpret women religious as enclosed women living in communal settings that were akin to male orders. Instead, the volume explores the whole range of medieval female religiosity, encompassing not only enclosed women religious, but also semi-religious women such as tertiaries, vowesses (women who took a vow of chastity but not of poverty and obedience), recluses, lay women religious and those leading canonical-oriented lifestyles. By doing so, the volume aligns itself with recent developments in scholarship that emphasize the multiplicity and diversity of monastic life.

Following the comprehensive introduction, that provides a thorough state of the art on various emerging themes in scholarship, including female religious ambiguity, its incorporation into traditional male orders, and male-female cooperation, the first five chapters focus upon the lived experiences of women religious. Contributions effectively reveal the diverse and experimental nature of female religious life.

In the opening chapter, Steven Vanderputten dismantles conventional narratives that divide women religious during the Carolingian reform and its aftermath into two distinct categories: Benedictine nuns and secular canonesses. Instead, he highlights the ambiguous nature of female religious life; a characteristic that, although sometimes challenged by ecclesiastical elite, was often accepted and nurtured by the same elite. Katherine Sykes expands this enduring diversity into the 12th century. Although this century is often interpreted as crucial in processes of institutionalisation



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and order creation, Sykes convincingly argues in favour of the continuous experimentation in the High Middle Ages. By studying three communities, Fontevraud, the Paraclete, and Sempringham, she rightly demonstrates that diversity within orders was as prevalent as between them. Alison More examines mendicants and tertiaries in later medieval Europe, debunking historiographical misconceptions and revealing the nuanced and ambivalent nature of female mendicants distinct from their male counterparts. Kate Gunn and Laura Richmond focus on the liminal figures of anchorites and vowesses. While these women lived at the fringes of communal monastic life, they were by no means marginal. On the contrary, they played central roles in medieval society and its devotional culture. At the same time, both authors show the wide variety within these groups – pointing towards women who had a tacit profession and informally pursued a semi-religious life, or vowesses who resided in monastic communities – and dispel the notion of a singly homogeneous cohort.

The intertwining of religious, semi-religious and secular society is further explored by Elizabeth A. Leffeldt and Rachel M. Delman. Although traditional historiography often stressed the incompetence of abbesses and their dependence on male assistance, Leffeldt convincingly argues in favour of their management skills. She equally shows the various backgrounds of these women who exercised power both within the monastery walls and without. Delman takes up this intertwining of religious and secular life by comparing monastic and secular households. She challenges the idea that monastic walls were thick and impermeable, and highlights the similarities in management, spiritual ideas, and devotional experiences.

Subsequent chapters provide a series of interconnected themes and disciplines, each revealing the diverse and rich nature of female monasticisms. Diana Denissen examines the question of literacies. She points towards the various levels of literacy among women religious and how they created their own spaces of learning. This plurality can also be seen in the networks and relationships of women religious with people outside their own community. By studying gift-giving and book exchange Sara Charles analyses how women religious maintained close relations with their natal family. It reminds us that there was as much diversity within communities as between, and that a community was often the result of a patchwork of overlapping networks and contacts.

Yvonne Seale adopts a landscape approach to study the diversity of women religious. The influence of medieval women religious on their environment was often seen as limited, leaving barely any (visible) traces in the historical or modern landscape. Seale shows how an interdisciplinary approach can shed new light on the relation between women and their environment and can raise new questions. The archaeological material further shows, as Tracy Collins argues, how the lack of uniformity is itself the most distinct characterisation of female medieval religious life. Lastly, Mercedes



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Pérez Vidal delves into the material culture and studies the role of women in shaping individual, dynastic, and collective memory through spatial layout and material artefacts.

»Medieval Women Religious« convincingly argues that women monasticisms »did not develop lineally or uniformly« (p. 3), but rather exhibited continuous diversity. The volume successfully presents a solid and diverse array of arguments, providing new perspectives on the wide range of possibilities of female monasticisms and the diverse way medieval women religious carved out their own space in society. Moreover, each chapter critically assesses the historiographical framework and offers directions of promising avenues of future research. The volume will undoubtedly serve as a valuable resource, offering an insightful overview of current scholarship and the evolving field of women religious studies.



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