

IAN JOHNSON AND ALLAN WESTPHALL (EDS) *The Pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ. Exploring the Middle English Tradition*. Medieval Church Studies 24. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013. Pp 510.

This work is one of several significant publications arising from a research project jointly conducted by The Queen's University, Belfast and St Andrew's University in Scotland, called "Geographies of Orthodoxy: Mapping the English Pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ, 1350-1550". In recent years there has been a serious re-evaluation of the English Church in the later Middle Ages and early modern period which would stress the vibrancy and relevancy of the Church against the view that from around 1400 it was an institution in decline only saved and resurrected by the Reformation from the early 16th century. Heterodoxy and heresy seem to attract more attention and create more interest than orthodoxy, which by contrast appears rather mundane and even boring. Starting with the ground breaking study and interpretation of Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992), there is now a realization that the "orthodox" Church of the later Middle Ages was not as moribund and decrepit as was hitherto thought. This present collection of essays looks at one of the manifestations of orthodoxy, the genre known as the "Lives of Christ", and attempts to assess the extent of their dissemination and their impact in Medieval England. These "Lives" are meditations on the life of Christ attributed to Saint Bonaventure, but actually written by many different authors. They were hugely influential on Catholic devotional practices across Europe from the 14th to the 16th centuries as an expression of the well-known phenomenon of greater attention to the humanity of Christ which characterized the later middle ages and to some extent even the early modern period.

It is interesting to note, however, that all but one of the fourteen contributors come from the field of English literature, not history, nor spiritual theology. The reason for this literary interest is that many of these "Lives" were written in the vernacular, not only in Middle English, but in early Italian, Celtic, medieval French and even Catalan. The development of vernacular texts, and therefore devotions and theology, is of considerable importance in the later middle ages when very often in England the production of materials in English was identified with heretical movements such as those who looked to John Wyclif and his followers. In 1409 Archbishop Thomas Arundel issued a decree forbidding the translation of the Bible into English and the composition of other vernacular texts without the permission of the Church authorities so worried were the bishops and the government that English texts might foment heresy. The result of this restriction, according to Nicholas Watson's highly influential analysis in 1995, was the evisceration of a budding theology rooted in vernacular texts of all creativity and insight. The editors of this present volume note in the Introduction that the continued composition of vernacular Lives of Christ, even in a controlled regime, shows that creativity and imagination were not lacking.

The volume is divided into three main sections of unequal length. The first, "History and Ideology" contains only two essays, both superb, of a general nature dealing with devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus across England, and secondly with the ideas of affectivity, dissent and orthodoxy in the general English context. The topic of manuscript culture occupies the second section with some very fine contributions from Vincent Gillespie, Michael Sargent, John Thompson, Ryan Perry and Amanda Moss. Issues here concentrate somewhat on readership and the relations between the various manuscripts of a given work. Finally, the longest section of the book is devoted to the pseudo-Bonaventuran tradition and includes essays on Nicholas Love's *Mirror*, several Wycliffite texts and Walter Hilton. One of the great virtues of this volume is that it includes not only well-established scholars (such as Gillespie, Sargent and Johnson), but it gives space and scope to early career and perhaps less well-known practitioners. The value of this work also is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of excellent bibliographies with each essay.

Medieval English Carmelites were involved in the discovery, verification and repression of heresies and heretical movements, so there is every reason for students of Carmelite history to be interested in this work. For example, Thomas Netter (d.1430) wrote two volumes of his massive theological work, the *Doctrinale*, specifically to show how Wycliffite view were dangerously wrong. Many of those friars who possessed doctorates were co-opted on to diocesan tribunals set up to investigate claims of heresy in the fourteenth and fifteenth. Some of the essayists recognize (albeit briefly) the contribution of Carmelites at a literary level too: Richard Mysin (d. 1462) translated Richard Rolle's *De emendatione vitae* and *Incendium amoris* into Middle English, thus aiding its dissemination among those who knew no Latin. On the other hand, it also appears that the Carmelite Thomas Fishlake (fl. 1370s) translated Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* from English into Latin, perhaps to show that a vernacular work was worthy of a more classical and traditional interpretation. At the very least, the cases of Mysin and Fishlake demonstrate that there is a certain amount of blurring in our understanding and classification of Latin and vernacular texts.

This work is important then, in a number of ways: first, it shows that vernacular texts were not all heterodox in nature, nor lacking in merit or attractiveness for being orthodox. The relationship between vernacular spirituality and literary output is a particularly complex one which this work goes a long way to unravelling and clarifying. The linear connection which would equate a creative spirituality with a heterodox theological viewpoint can no longer be sustained in the light of these studies of the "Lives of Christ" genre. Secondly, various authors here point out that devotional practices in the later middle ages were as important and significant as intellectual discourses and academic treatments of religious issues. Carmelite involvement, while perhaps slight, represents nonetheless a microcosm of this general picture: both Thomas Netter and Richard Mysin played an important part in supporting the orthodoxy and the orthopraxy of the late medieval Church in England.