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Book Review:
John H. Arnold's, Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe

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'Since it is the task of the historian to look upon a particular fact as merely a link in a chain, to regard it in relation to some greater whole… the writer of history who desires to be more than a mere antiquarian must have a thorough theoretical training in those fields of inquiry with which his work is concerned… No theory, no history!'[1]

The economist Werner Sombart wrote these words in 1929, and they are no less true for the present-day historian of the medieval period. The influence of long-dead economists and social scientists upon our field can be seen in the intellectual inheritance of its most renowned practitioners; Michael Postan drew heavily from the theories of Thomas Malthus when outlining his population-resources model of English demographics; Maurice Dobb, Rodney Hilton and Robert Brenner developed distinct Marxist approaches to the study of class, feudalism and popular revolt; and D. L. D'Avray and Jean-Claude Schmitt are just two prominent examples of how the social histories of lay religion and the medieval church continue to be informed by Durkheim and Weber. However, historians of the Middle Ages have traditionally maintained a distance between their discipline and the kind of 'theory' popular among social scientists and modernists. Since the late 1990s, Michel Foucault has been one of the most cited theorists in the humanities and yet medieval history has scarcely begun to engage with his theoretical frameworks as they have with those of Marx and Malthus.[2] Applications of Foucauldian approaches in medieval history tend to be found in the study of sexuality, and there remains considerable division among these scholars as to whether Foucault's theories are useful tools for avoiding anachronistic readings or whether they themselves lend themselves to anachronistic readings.[3] Furthermore, Foucault's own work on the Middle Ages are sub-par compared to that which is concerned with the early-

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[1] W. Sombart, 'Economic Theory and Economic History', *The Economic History Review*, 2/1 (1929), p. 3.
[2] J. T. Nealon, *Foucault beyond Foucault: Power and its Intensifications since 1984* (Stanford, 2007), p. 1.
[3] K. Phillips & B. Reay, *Sex before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (London, 2011), pp. 12-3.

modern and modern periods, leading the majority of medievalists to dismiss them for their 'superficiality, lack of detail, and indifference to documents and their nuances.'[4]

The scholarship of John Arnold is therefore something of a rare breed in its reconciliation of Foucauldian theory and rigorous analysis of historical evidence. Arnold has throughout his career made a conscious effort to connect the study of medieval religion with wider meta-historical questions pertaining to the origins and nature of religious belief, its expression in religious activities, and its role in the formation of the in-group set apart from the out-group. To this end, Arnold's *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* draws on an area of Foucault's body of work that has received surprisingly little attention from medievalists; namely, Foucault's general theory of power. Foucault characterised power as both a positive and negative force, a horizontal 'grid of disciplinary coercions' that shape and maintain social cohesion.[5] According to Foucault, this kind of disciplinary power became the primary means of governance in modern Europe, with earlier forms of governance relying on the power of sovereignty, state repression, and coercion.

Belief and Unbelief can be regarded as the culmination of a dialogue, traceable throughout Arnold's research, between this theory of power and the experiences of medieval Christians as they appear to us in the surviving record. In *Inquisition and Power* (2001), Arnold drew upon Foucauldian ideas of power in his evaluation of inquisition records from medieval Languedoc.[6] He concluded that the inquisitorial discourse gave the 'confessing subject' a sense of empowerment, one which allowed them to take pleasure in voicing and unburdening themselves of their transgressive views and behaviours.[7] This ambitious reading was criticised in several publications for paying insufficient attention to the fact that these confessions are mediated by the act of their recording by an inquisitor, rendering any conclusions regarding the subject's general state of mind during confession highly suspect.[8] *Belief and Unbelief* (2005) shows a development in methodology from a bold, sometimes ill-considered application of Foucauldian theory to one that is well-supported by the evidence

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[4] A. J. Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from "Beowulf" to "Angels in America"* (Chicago & London, 1998), pp. 7-11; For a less condemnatory assessment of Foucault's medieval studies, see A. C. Bartlett, 'Foucault's "Medievalism"', *Mystics Quarterly*, 20/1 (1994), pp. 11-4.

[5] M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. C. Gordon (London, 1980), pp. 95-106.

[6] J. H. Arnold, *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc* (Philadelphia, 2001), pp .10-1.

[7] Arnold, *Inquisition and Power*, pp. 10-1, 92-102

[8] B. Hamilton, 'Review: Inquisition and Power. Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc, by John H. Arnold', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 89/3 (2003), pp. 548-9; M. G. Pegg, 'Review: Inquisition and Power. Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc, by John H. Arnold', *Speculum*, 79/1 (2004), pp. 123-5.

and comprehensive in its analysis of how dissent manifested within a wider culture of religious orthodoxy. At no point in this volume do we get the impression of the integrity of the evidence being subordinated by a need to prove one theory or another – Foucault himself is cited only twice in the entire monograph. Instead, Arnold takes from theory that which can provide a useful interpretive model for contextualising his findings.

The structure of *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* may come across as unusual or haphazard to regular readers of medieval religious history. The book is divided into chapters with no regard for chronology or geography, and readers should not expect anything more than a cursory overview of the development of the medieval Catholic Church as an institution. Nor does Arnold rely on the standard formula of having an introduction and conclusion to frame his arguments; instead, his central argument is articulated through the organisation of the chapters themselves. The first chapter, *Belief*, serves as an introduction of sorts while establishing that individual belief was inseparable from religious practice, both individual and communal. The second chapter, *Acculturation*, follows this by discussing how the church was able to socialise medieval Christians to a specific set of beliefs through the promotion of certain practices. The third and fourth chapters take shift the focus away from the relationship of communal activity to individual belief and toward the communities themselves, namely the rituals, celebrations, devotions to saints, and other such activities that aided in their formation and consolidation. The fifth chapter *Selfhood* however takes the focus back to the individual and how he or she defined themselves in relation to church and community. Here Arnold draws our attention to the question of why some people chose to define themselves in opposition to those norms, and how these processes of acculturation and community-building could isolate and exclude individuals as well as integrate and acclimatise them. This leads us into the longest chapter and the cornerstone of this volume, *Dissent*, which at its core asks the question: when an individual failed to be acculturated into the religious community, how did that community punish or reform that person?

Rather than being a purely modern phenomenon, Arnold has shown that the horizontal, disciplinary power of the social norm could be used by a medieval religious community to police the beliefs and behaviour of its members, rather than relying on the centralised power of the state or the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Whenever these authorities resorted to using force to punish dissent it did not demonstrate their power as much as signify its failure; public displays of penance were always preferred over violence or execution, as these displays reinforced 'the boundaries of transgression' as well as the church's capacity for

mercy and forgiveness.[9] Furthermore, these boundaries were produced and policed as much by lay believers as church authorities. Arnold uses the examples of Jews, lepers, prostitutes and heretics to discuss the precise ways in which 'the *process* of exclusion' could serve a positive social function for the excluders: 'the 'centre' was *produced* by positioning these groups at the social margins'.[10] The discourse of orthodoxy thereby not only served a social function but enabled medieval people to make sense of themselves and the world they lived in. Arnold grounds this thesis in a close reading of inquisitorial records in which members of the community used their intimate knowledge of one another's transgressions to settle grudges, deflect inquisitorial attention, and define themselves in relation to the boundaries of heterodox and orthodox thought.[11]

Where Foucault was prone to generalisation across time periods in developing his theory of power, Arnold historicises by incorporating those forms of power unique to a society where the supernatural was normalised and omnipresent. This is most evident in the fourth chapter, in which he discusses the means by which supernatural sources of power could be drawn upon by medieval lay people in order to navigate societal, ostensibly 'secular' power relations. Arnold uses cases of prosecution for the practice of magic to show how ordinary and marginalised lay people (such as women and Muslims) could instrumentalise the supernatural in order to wield power in their communities, and the means by which ecclesiastical authorities sought to police and regulate this behaviour.[12] The line between sacred and secular power was similarly blurred in the cases of saints and holy men. Over the course of the Middle Ages, the path to sainthood became less the preserve of 'powerful protector' to those who embodied holiness in their 'mode of life', providing an ascetic counter or mitigation to the trappings of contemporary urban society 'for the benefit of the wider community.'[13] This development was prompted by the growth of urbanisation, literacy, and commerce. Penitential suffering provided comfort to the poor and alleviated the guilt of the rich. Mysticism and mendicant poverty, though heavily policed, provided exemplars. Hermit or reclusive communities, such as the beguines, offered women a path to holiness they would have difficulty achieving on their own. The activities of these holy men and women provided 'models and patterns' for others to follow in 'apostolic imitation', and Arnold grounds these patterns and groupings of holy people in terms of 'factional power' within communities.[14]

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[9] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 14-5.
[10] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 118-23.
[11] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 201-7.
[12] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 97-9.
[13] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, p. 74.
[14] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 71-83.

In his fifth chapter on selfhood Arnold challenges Foucault's own separation between modern and medieval mentalities with respect to power and governance. The confessional and heretical discourses informed not only the way medieval people policed one another but also their own behaviours and thought processes, enabling the formation of individual Christian identities. Arnold identifies in medieval European society a form of 'self-discipline' promoted by a growing literature encouraging self-examination and reflection. Texts such as the Goodman of Paris' instructions, as well as confessional literature, exerted a power over people that was 'gentle, encouraging and caring… through being cared for, encouraged to improve ourselves, we are shaped.'[15] In this argument Arnold goes beyond and even challenges Foucault's assessment of the Middle Ages as 'a cultural space free of the routine and disabling surveillance that, for Foucault, characterizes modern society.'[16] In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault draws a very sharp divide between the spectacular and coercive methods by which medieval power was wielded and the 'disciplinary power' and 'control through normalisation' which he believed was unique to modern industrialised societies.[17] He furthermore characterised modern disciplinary power as one that was enacted 'upon bodies' and classical/medieval sovereign power as one that derived from material forces.[18] Yet as Arnold points out, medieval ideas of selfhood and spirituality 'were often entwined with ideas about the body.' While it took a very different form in the Middle Ages to that of modern Europe, regulation of the body was as central to medieval Catholic Christianity as it was to the modern industrial state. Sin and temptation could enter through bodies, and so they required regulation through fasting, abstinence, and even whippings or beatings of one's own flesh as a means of self-discipline.[19]

This raises an important question for historians as to how far one can identify common cultural practices across time periods using theory that is in itself very much a product of a particular culture at a particular time. It would be anachronistic to argue in favour of 'bio-politics,' in the modern Foucauldian sense of the word, existing in medieval England; Arnold himself only narrowly avoids falling into this trap. Yet the question of whether terms such as 'identity' and 'discourse' can find a proper place in medieval history contains within it a greater problem: does the search for individual Christian identities within medieval discourses inevitably place too much emphasis on how individuals identified what they were

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[15] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 184-7.
[16] Bartlett, 'Foucault's "Medievalism"', p. 15.
[17] M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, Trans. A Sheridan (New York, 2nd Ed., 1995) p. 184
[18] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 104.
[19] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 187-8.

not (heretic, Jew, Saracen), rather than what they actually were? Does a focus on the margins and the extraordinary obscure the everyday lived experience of the majority (a thesis that underpins the work of Eamon Duffy), or does the study of the centre and ordinary obscure the real, heterogeneous nature of medieval attitudes and identities?[20] Scholars such as Arnold take a view that studying the margins can tell us a great deal about the centre, that not doing so leads to a falsely homogenised view of the past, and that obedience and dissent exist on a spectrum rather than in bipolar opposition. It is only with regard to outright *Unbelief* that Arnold over-states his case, the word itself having connotations with modern atheism. Though Arnold is eager to distinguish between 'a complete rejection of God and the supernatural' and disbelief of Catholic teachings as to the nature of God, his suggestion that cases of blasphemy and disbelief were under-reported implies that the examples that occur in inquisitorial records are merely the tip of the heretical iceberg.[21] Readers should therefore exercise caution with this final section of the book not to come away with an exaggerated impression of the amount of unbelief – both in terms of the number of cases and their severity – present in medieval societies. For the sake of balance, reading this volume in conjunction with Duffy's highly partisan *The Stripping of the Altars* or Robert Swanson's *Church and Society in Late Medieval England*, which provides a much more cautious assessment of what constituted 'normal' belief and practice than that of Duffy and Arnold.

Arnold furthermore pays scant attention to the regular, everyday occurrences in which medieval people expressed their 'belief' or 'unbelief' in ways that did not involve explicit self-identification or overt expression of views in speech or writing. For instance, the interaction of economic activity and pious activity was central to how the majority of laywomen saw their role in their church and community; piecemeal work and 'church-keeping', charitable initiatives based around donations of moveable material goods, active leadership of 'life-cycle liturgies', and other self-directed endeavours of labour and performance, were common to women of multiple social strata.[22] Where Arnold does briefly discuss the role of charity and communal organisation in fostering a church community with relation to guilds and festivals, women are surprisingly absent, and throughout the rest of *Belief and Unbelief* are discussed only in relation to how their gender was constructed and policed through discourse, such as through religious instruction or imitation of female saints.

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[20] E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven, CT., 2nd Ed., 2005)

[21] Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief*, pp. 220-29

[22] See: K. L. French, *Good Women of the Parish: Gender and Religion After the Black Death* (Philadelphia, 2008); C. Hill, *Women and Religion in Late Medieval Norwich* (Woodbridge, 2010)

Furthermore, there is no sense here of how lay men or women expressed their piety 'through their pockets,' or of how lay people were increasingly empowered by their growing involvement in the day-to-day economic routines and structures of the parish church – developments which reached their apex during the time period covered by *Belief and Unbelief*.[23] It would be unfair to expect Arnold to provide as systematic and comprehensive overview of the economic aspect of medieval European religion in addition to his analysis of power and culture, and yet its omission entirely gives *Belief and Unbelief* a sense of incompleteness.

Overall, *Belief and Unbelief* is a lively and important study of how medieval religious believers exercised power and autonomy within the discourses of heresy/orthodoxy, belief/unbelief, and virtuous or sinful behaviour. Both historians and non-specialists will be pleased to find Arnold's writing is refreshingly free of the jargon and anachronism that pervades much of Foucauldian-influenced historical scholarship. Most significantly, it has demonstrated the value that historians of pre-modern societies may find in drawing upon approaches and methodologies from other disciplines.

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[23] R. N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 217-27, 253-308.

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