

These two books focus on contrasting periods from the millennium we call the Middle Ages. Both draw on a depth of scholarship in seeking to offer something to the non-specialist reader as well as the student in search of reliable and compressed information. Both also make some claim to enhance our understanding of the Church in the present through a better understanding of its past.

Wright’s *Companion* focuses on a single text. After a brief introduction, he guides us through Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* with a section of comment on every chapter or group of chapters. True to the title, this is a reader’s rather than a scholar’s commentary: footnotes come at the rate of rather less than one every other page, and there are perhaps surprisingly few lengthy explorations of specific issues (the chapter on Bede’s treatment of the Synod of Whitby being something of an exception here). Wright’s primary concern is to provide enough context for the reader working through the text for the first time to appreciate what Bede is doing as a historian, and the significance of his decisions about what to record and how to present it. Although based on the author’s teaching materials, it hardly appears as a text book, being beautifully produced with some striking illustrations. Helpful appendices include questions for discussion and suggestions for further reading.

The preface describes Bede’s text as ‘the earliest history of the Anglican tradition of Christianity’ (p. vi). Wright thus locates himself within the kind of Anglicanism that is concerned to include the English Church of the Middle Ages as a part of its own story. Most of his occasional contemporary asides relate to Anglican issues (e.g. pp. 75, 83). Are these also in his mind when he asks us to note that, as in the days of St. Mellitus, ‘Some today … believe that traditional teaching has been superseded by modern considerations and is not worth defending’ (p. 49)?

*The Church in the Later Middle Ages*, by contrast, reviews two centuries in the global history of the Christian Church and touches on an astonishing array of sources. Predictable chapters on ‘Papacy and Councils’, ‘Clergy and Religious Orders’ and ‘Knowledge and Culture’ are juxtaposed with others on
‘Laity’ (perhaps the outstanding chapter of the book), ‘Heresy and Dissent’ and ‘Christendom and the Non-Christian World’. Tanner rightly stresses that while the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have often been regarded in western Church history as a period when little of real interest happened and all sorts of decline set in, scholarship in recent decades has done much to challenge this picture which has its roots in the sixteenth-century Reformations.

To take just one example, the Conciliarist movement represented a very significant development within the history and self-understanding of the Western Church, as Tanner emphasizes in his treatment of it. Moreover, he also notes that when its successes gave a relatively broad cross-section of people the opportunity to legislate for change, the reforms sought were somewhat modest, suggesting that there was not in fact a swelling tide of discontent with institutional Christianity on which the Protestant Reformation could finally ride in the sixteenth century. Elsewhere, Tanner shows how the institutional Church in the late medieval West was an integral, carefully negotiated and generally accepted part of ordinary life for most men and women, a view that is clearly convergent with for instance Duffy’s seminal analysis of the Reformation in England.

Tanner’s concern to do justice to what was happening in the Eastern Churches in this period as well as describing the vibrancy and diversity in the West is laudable; so is his desire to give the Church’s ‘outsiders’, from heretics to Muslims and Jews, due attention without losing his focus on what church was like for most people, most of the time. Inevitably, however, in a main text of less than 200 pages, hard decisions have to be made. Six out of seven chapters deal with Western Christianity, and the entirely understandable decision to make ‘The Eastern Churches’ a separate chapter perhaps diminishes exploration of the interaction between East and West. Tanner explains that later medieval theologians, most notably Scotus and Ockham, have been increasingly recognized as significant figures in their own right, rather than merely markers on the downward slope from the summit of Thomas Aquinas. Yet his presentation of their achievements may not make it very clear why they should have a claim to be regarded as figures of enduring significance, or how the negative judgements about their influence that continue to be replicated in highly influential accounts of intellectual history, from Alasdair MacIntyre to Radical Orthodoxy, might be resisted. The concern to cover every aspect of Church life leads on the one hand to a certain lack of descriptive colour in some chapters (though the case study on medieval Norwich is a helpful corrective) and on the other to an absence of strong unifying themes: we do not get very close up to medieval people all that often, but equally