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JOHN HOWE, *Before the Gregorian Reform: The Latin Church at the Turn of the First Millennium*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv, 353; many black-and-white figures and 2 maps. $45. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5289-5.
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John Howe's *Before the Gregorian Reform* is a challenging and important book. Readers will find it challenging because Howe takes aim, sometimes provocatively, at a number of recent and increasingly popular arguments concerning the so-called "age of iron." It is important because, in boldly asserting its positions, it will force readers to examine their own assumptions about a range of historical processes, including, but by no means limited to, church reform. Howe's approach to the latter is squarely denotative; he uses the language, intellectual categories, and ideas of ecclesiastical and lay elites to describe their aims and agendas when it came to renewing the church, a focus which, he argues, constitutes "a legitimate subject of inquiry, perhaps more historically consequential than the medieval world's myriad local folk and minority traditions" (10). He takes as a given that the Latin church and prominent individuals within it embraced myriad ideals concerning reform, and repeatedly attempted to put those ideals into practice by bringing individual, social, and institutional realities into conformity with them. As he notes in his introduction, the author completed his dissertation under the direction of Gerhart B. Ladner, and it shows: in his magisterial *The Idea of Reform* (1959), Ladner argued that reform was a, if not *the*, historically animating force in Catholic Christianity—culturally tethered to Latin Europe and its church; ever-renewing; both personal and institutional in scope; and striving for a perfectibility it could never attain. In both Ladner and Howe's conception, reform entailed progress—not endless, repetitive cycles of renewal and decay, but asymptotic progress toward spiritual freedom expressed as oneness with and knowledge of God.

Notions of reform-as-progress inform Howe's book. It is implied throughout and evident in the choice of chapter titles (from chap. 1, "Wolves Devouring the Lambs of Christ," to the epilogue, "A Pope Captured, A Church Triumphant") and in the book's final pages (296, 300, 312–13), where Howe concludes that generations of reforming churchmen from the late Carolingian period through the early eleventh century successfully rebuilt a battered and threadbare church, creating the conditions crucial for later generations of reformers to enact reform on a scale encompassing the entire Latin *ecclesia* and Christian society. In Howe's narrative, in a striking and quite useful reorientation away from the traditional model of a top-down, eleventh-century, "Gregorian" reform—which many scholars have long found problematic—Leo IX's pontificate does not inaugurate a new era of church and papal ascendancy so much as signal the culmination of an earlier era of renewal. Leo, Gregory VII, and their successors could articulate a universal vision of a renewed Christian society because its foundations had been set in bedrock in the previous century.

The volume consists of nine chapters bookended by an introduction and an epilogue. It centers mostly on the lands of the former Carolingian empire. The first chapter assesses the impact of Viking, Magyar, and Arab raiding on Western Europe and its short- and long-term implications for the millennial church. From there Howe settles into a synchronic examination of socioeconomic recovery and monastic revival, the restoration of ecclesiastical patrimonies, and church building (chaps. 2–3). Subsequent chapters highlight the construction and donation of reliquaries and other objects of Christian worship, such as crucifixes, statues, books, and vestments, and the growth of the liturgy, which connected the local and universal church to ordinary Christians and made manifest its glory and prestige (chaps. 4–5). The remainder of the book considers the development of individual spirituality and devotional practices, including the veneration of saints and their images, Marian and eucharistic devotion, and the growing valuation of the natural world as a medium for prayer and meditation; the revival of education,

"essential to ecclesiastical reform" around the year 1000 (204–205); the priestly and social bodies of the church; and cross-cultural (primarily Greek) influences on the Latin church (chaps. 6–9). Nearly fifty black-and-white illustrations and maps populate the book's pages and inject it with vitality.

Those familiar with Howe's earlier work, particularly his influential articles on the subject of church reform, know that he is a master synthesizer. In this regard, *Before the Gregorian Reform* does not disappoint. Howe calls upon a truly impressive array of evidence and scholarship from the fields of history, literature, liturgical studies, art and architectural history, and theological studies in support of his argument, and scholars will profit immensely from perusing his footnotes. The book is loaded with important insights and asides, for example on the value of the natural world to medieval spirituality (199–203) and on the parallels and cultural cross-fertilization between the Greek and Latin churches (chap. 9). Most importantly, Howe's work lands another hammer blow on the older, confessionally driven, top-down paradigm of church reform championed by Augustin Fliche, and does so in a style that is self-consciously accessible to specialist and nonspecialist readers (he acknowledges his potential Catholic readers at one point). The papacy, quite rightly, occupies the hazy background.

Some, however, may be roused by Howe's opening chapter on the troubled tenth century, which pushes back against the emphasis of the past several decades on the Vikings as traders, craftsmen, and settlers as well as looters and slavers (14–15, 32). Following his ecclesiastical sources, Howe notes that persistent plundering by Northmen, Hungarian raiders, and north African pirates left Latin Christians "demoralized" (50) and their religious buildings, goods, and personnel in tatters. Some scholars have been less persuaded by these (almost always later) descriptions. Other readers may find Howe's choice of language frustrating, including repeated use of phrases such as "the West," "Latin West," "Western Christians," and "the civilization of the Latin West" (for example, on p. 8), or may find the identification of places, peoples, or individuals using confessional markers of identity (e.g., "Christian Italy remained in danger" [28], "Islamic forces" [29]) overly reductive. Passing reference to the "tragic trifecta" of the destruction of the Holy Sepulchre, Saint Peter's basilica in Rome, and the church of Saint James in Compostela by "Islamic forces" (29) carries an emotional charge, as does the phrase "Muslims also attacked [Western Europe]" (23). Well, yes—but contemporaries did not refer to the mixed Arab, Berber, and other north African raiders as "Muslims," so this language is problematic even in a denotative analysis. The emotional polarity is reversed, yet still evident, in Howe's later observation that "[Ecclesiastical] revival heartened the West" (85). This is unquestionably the language of our sources, and no doubt captures the mood of many contemporaries. But in virtually every case, such descriptive adjectives might have been removed without sacrificing accuracy, and other more neutral nouns supplied in lieu of polarizing phrases like "the West," with its uncomfortable affinity to "clash of civilizations" narratives.

Choice of language is one thing; but denotative approaches, although commonly employed by historians, also limit interpretive strategies and angles. While ecclesiastical reform unquestionably inspired men and women toward the commendable goals of personal betterment, education, social peace, and justice, it also offered cover for the exercise of power, domination, and authority. Here, the sincerity and basic decency of local efforts to restore local churches take precedence over other interpretive positions. Discourses of "reform" and "revival" favor certain narratives and figures—the charismatic, impresario founder who champions reform among them—over others. I am not suggesting that Howe is insensitive to conflict, material concerns, or the inherent complexity of Latin Christendom and its many regions, churches, and authorities (231)—far from it. Indeed, a central goal of the book is to undergird the idealistic language of reform with observed practices and above all, the artifacts of material culture. Howe amasses overwhelming evidence to this end, and this book

will be required reading for all those interested in the subject of reform. But, as often happens in progress-oriented teleologies, however modest and nuanced their claims for that progress may be, other experiences, motives, and readings of the evidence are inevitably crowded out.

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