Introduction

Rethinking early medieval Christianity: a view from the Netherlands

MAYKE DE JONG

For the Leeds International Medieval Congress in 1996 I convened a group of speakers under the heading ‘The Bible and Politics in the Early Medieval West’. The five paper published here originated as part of this venture, and retain much of their original shape and brevity. They remain what they were in 1996; succinct discussion papers. It is this introduction which has changed beyond recognition. Reflecting afterwards on my reasons for gathering the sessions at Leeds, I realized that I had a multiple agenda. Partly this belonged to a more collective endeavour which had gained momentum since the 1980s: taking early medieval Christianity seriously, as an integral part of mainstream historical research. Robert E. McNally who in 1959 was the first to make early medieval biblical commentary accessible to students, nonetheless expressed the view that the ‘direct and immediate role’ of the Bible in the formation of early medieval piety was negligible, for ‘new religious forms, less biblical but more popular arose to take its place’.

This ghost – early medieval Christianity as a deviant and watered-down version of the ‘real thing’ – original Christianity – was much on my mind.

Above all, however, I hoped to mobilize the growing interest in the complicated ways in which biblical models shaped new forms of political self-representation in the post-Roman west. In 1996 there was already plenty of food for thought in print. Janet L. Nelson (1995) emphasized once more that early medieval kingship, Frankish and otherwise, had ‘its basis in a gens, a people, and hence the bonding of

---

ruler and ruled'. This sharing of the lay aristocracy in the advent of the Carolingian dynasty, and in nations of the Franks as the Elect, had been one of the crucial aspects overlooked by Pirenne, she maintained. From the lively field of Viennese study of ‘ethnogenesis’ Walter Pohl had argued in 1994 that the central question raised by the so-called ‘Narrators of Barbarian History’ was not so much concerned with the nature of the new peoples, as with the question of how God’s hand operated in a world which had become a Christian one. The second volume of Nikolaus Staubach’s sophisticated Rex christianus had come out in 1993, and my own work on Carolingian royal monasteries had confronted me with what Matthew Innes has recently called ‘the sense of a corporate Frankish Church as a defining political force’.

All this raised a whole host of questions concerning the uses of the Bible in general, and of the Old Testament in particular, in the early medieval polities in the west. How did the élites of these New Israels, if they indeed perceived themselves as such, reflect upon the biblical books of history dealing with the Old Israel? How was Old Testament law adapted to new needs and purposes? Which mechanisms of elective affinity were at work? Raymond Kottje’s pioneering work on the influence of the Old Testament on early medieval legal practice had opened up a whole territory still waiting to be explored. To my mind, we

---


6 R. Kottje, Studien zum Einfluss des alten Testaments auf Recht und Liturgie des frühen Mittelalters (6. bis 8. Jahrhundert) (Bonn, 1965; 2nd edn 1970). Much less well-known, but also an excellent introduction, and written without knowledge of Kottje’s work, or vice versa: J. Chydenius, Medieval Institutions and the Old Testament, Societas Scien-

---
were dealing with the question of how texts helped to shape political identities, with the books of the Old Testament taking pride of place as the most authoritative text of all. Not that the New Testament was unimportant, for these were Christian kingdoms. Yet when it came to finding images of history and law to be integrated into contemporary concerns, early medieval ideologues had to rely on the normative world of the Old Testament.

These were some of the more immediate concerns which created the sessions in 1996 on ‘The Bible and Politics’. But there were also the background of my student days at the University of Amsterdam. At the very time (1970) when Peter Brown in Oxford taught his now celebrated course on ‘Society and the Supernatural: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammed’,7 we in Amsterdam listened to Van de Kieft’s clear and competent lectures on ‘The Investiture Controversy/Dispute’. This meant an entire year of Investiture Struggle without the tiniest bit of religion entering upon the scene. What had these popes and emperors been so excited about, one wondered, if not the struggle for the sacred? And was not Fliche and Martin’s ‘L’Eglise au pouvoir des laïcs’ a rather anachronistic concept if one wanted to make sense of Charlemagne? In all fairness, we were thoroughly trained and are still grateful for it. Moreover Van de Kieft underwent something of a conversion on the eve of his retirement in 1984. He now lectured on ‘The Christian Middle Ages’ and immersed himself with great enthusiasm in Notker Balbulus. But by then quite a few of his students had fled from the concerns of traditional institutional history – Church and State – to the unknown early Middle Ages, turning their minds to religious history with a vengeance.8

A lot of this had to do with an ongoing process of European secularization and deconfessionalization in the 1960s, which allowed medieval historians to view the symbolic systems of their own past in terms of

---


8 Three Amsterdam dissertations of the 1980s which radically moved away from the type of institutional history we were trained in: A. Sapir Abula®a, ‘Texts and Studies on Jewish±Christian Relations and the Eleventh-Century Church’ (1984); M. de Jong, ‘Kind en klooster in de vroege middeleeuwen (1986); M. Mostert, ‘The Political Theology of Abbo of Fleury (1986). The other fields which attracted many students were regional and local history of the later Middle Ages, with the palaeographer/archivist J.L. van der Gouw as the central figure.
distance and otherness. Medieval Christianity gradually became a more foreign and therefore intriguing country; the Second Vatican Council was to transform the way in which Roman Catholics and protestants alike approached ‘Church history’. All this is visible with hindsight, but it took at least a decade before these shock waves made themselves felt.

When dealing with the way in which Christianity re-entered mainstream medieval history as a legitimate concern, it is perhaps useful to tackle this vast and intractable topic from the vantage point of academic life in a small country, and in the shape of a personal peregrinatio. In the Netherlands students used to read the more important modern and classical languages as a matter of course, so foreign debates tended to have an immediate and forceful impact. At least, that was the case for those of us who moved outside the charmed circle of the dominant ‘Vaderlandse Geschiedenis’, so reminiscent of the isolation of Anglo-Saxon studies and other nationally-inspired historiographies. My own intellectual escape route from this chauvinistic swamp led via an inspiring if somewhat erratic Belgian, the ex-Carmelite monk and historian Albert Demyttenaere, to the French historiography of the 1970s, and above all to the work of Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt. Ultimately, the opposition between ‘culture folklorique’ and

---

9 I have explored this theme in ‘The Foreign Past. Medieval Historians and Cultural Anthropology’, Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 3 (1996), pp. 326–42. When responding to a review by E. Vance, B. Stock summed up the Roman Catholic version of the dilemma of ‘alterity’: ‘In my view, a symbolically important break occurred when the Church abandoned Latin Mass. However, once the divorce between medieval and modern culture was complete, it was possible to look upon the Latin Middle Ages and its European literary continuation as an alien culture in much the same way that an anthropologist looks upon non-western societies (…) The alterity of the Middle Ages is an undisputed fact. It is also an advantage: for, once the distance between medieval and modern culture is acknowledged, it is advantageous to think of a perspective that is both anthropological and historical, to adopt a position that is comparative and not simply hierarchical; and, above all, to see discontinuities as well as continuities…’ Cf. B. Stock, ‘Afterthoughts’, Diacritics (Fall 1986), pp. 74–8.

10 An early (and continuing) instance of such a non-confessional approach is provided in England by the important medieval contributions to Studies in Church History, collections of papers published annually from 1964 and whose contributors by the early 1970s included Robert Markus and Janet Nelson.


‘culture cléricale’ proved untenable, particularly for the earlier Middle Ages. One was left with a strong sense of clerical concerns of the thirteenth century and later being projected on to an earlier age. Yet their approach forced us to re-examine the role of the early medieval ‘church’, which was perhaps less monolithic than we had suspected. Another hot item in Amsterdam at this time was the work of Norbert Elias. His paradigm of the civilizing process was passionately embraced by historical sociologists and anthropologists alike. This was, however, yet another version of grand historical development with religion safely left out; irritatingly, the earlier Middle Ages was once more reduced to a backdrop for all manner of civilized developments in later periods. These evolutionist perspectives – or should one say, non-perspectives? – on early medieval history helped to define the problem. Religious phenomena should no longer be treated as being ‘actually’ about something entirely different. What presents itself in medieval sources as a religious act – for example, the gift of a child to God – should be taken on precisely these terms. In my case, this conviction grew during work on a dissertation about an eminently Old

---

13 For a survey of the problem, with copious references to relevant literature, see J. Van Engen, ‘The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem’, American Historical Review 91 (1986), pp. 519–52. Also, A.J. Gurevich, ‘Popular and Scholarly Medieval Cultural Traditions: [Notes in the Margin of Jacques Le Goff’s Book]’, Journal of Medieval History 9 (1981), pp. 71–90; M. de Jong, ‘Volk en geloof in vroegmiddeleeuwse teksten’, in G. Rooijakkers and Th. van der Zee (eds.), Religieuze volkscultuur. De spanning tussen de voorgeschreven orde en de geleefde praktijk (Nijmegen, 1986), pp. 16–35. Students in Amsterdam in the 1970s were not only influenced by the new French historiography, but also – and perhaps more so – by a book which made early medieval hagiography one of our central concerns: F. Graus, Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger (Prague, 1965). In the 1980s Rudi Künzel (Amsterdam) published a number of perceptive articles about the interdependence of medieval clerical and popular culture, which were integrated in his Beelden en zelfbeelden van middeleeuwse mensen. Historisch-anthropologische studies over groeps culturen in de Nederlanden, 7e-13e eeuw (Nijmegen, 1997); see also idem, ‘Paganisme, syncretisme et culture religieuse populaire au haut Moyen Âge’, Annales ESC 47 (1992), pp. 1053–69.


Testament model inserting itself into Carolingian monasticism and élite culture: the image of Samuel and the oblation of children.\textsuperscript{16}

Meanwhile, a lot had happened. In Münster a remarkable project had started on early medieval associations of prayer. A wealth of information concerning the relations between monastic communities and their Umwelt suddenly became available. Together with their Münster colleagues, Karl Schmid and Joachim Wollasch dispelled lingering anachronistic notions about the supposed isolation of early medieval religious communities.\textsuperscript{17} On the other side of the Atlantic monastic and religious history was also being revolutionized, notably by Lester K. Little, Barbara H. Rosenwein and Patrick J. Geary.\textsuperscript{18} Clearly ‘Annales’ historiography continued to have a fruitful impact on Northern American medievalists. By the early 1980s the Dutch tended to look elsewhere – not least to the Americans. Furthermore, publications by Janet Nelson and Arnold Angenendt supported some of us getting interested in ‘ritual’ in the conviction that liturgical sources were indeed important to early medieval historians.\textsuperscript{19}

By 1977 I had moved to an environment where I felt all the more keenly the need to explore the otherness of early medieval Christianity: the Catholic University of Nijmegen. In this congenial place chock-full of lapsed Dutch clerics, the Christian Middle Ages needed no defence. Yet this omnipresent sense of continuity with medieval Christendom posed its own problems. Familiarity breeds contempt – or more accurately, it makes things invisible. Hence, my lectures on early


\textsuperscript{19} J.L. Nelson’s articles from the years 1971–85 have been gathered in \textit{eadem}, \textit{Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe} (London and Ronceverte, 1986); her ‘Kingship, Law and Liturgy in the Political Thought of Hincmar of Rheims’, \textit{English Historical Review} 92 (1977), pp. 241–9, especially influenced the direction of my own work; the same held true for A. Angenendt, ‘Taufe und Politik im frühen Mittelalter’, \textit{Frühmittelalterliche Studien} 7 (1973), pp. 143–68.
medieval child oblation or various conceptions of the Mass could provoke colleagues because they did not embody the authoritative version of the story as told by Gratian and Thomas Aquinas. It was a salutary experience, for it made me aware how much the self-satisfied agnostic/protestant atmosphere of Amsterdam had conditioned us to view symbolic systems of the past in terms of distance and otherness, rather than as an object of confessional apology or anti-clerical criticism. All academic environments have their peculiar blessings. In Nijmegen there were students who knew their liturgy from first-hand experience, and a lot better than their teachers. For example, once I had finally figured out the intricacies of Ash Wednesday in the library, and reported my findings to them, they looked at me as if I had gone slightly mad: we could have told you all this long ago! This was the context in which re-reading Mary Douglas’s work yielded precious new insights, for it was a way of distancing oneself from the tendency to treat Christianity as a monolithic and unchanging entity.\(^20\) What classical culture had been to historians of antiquity, medieval Christianity had been to many medievalists, at least outside Amsterdam: the foundation of modern civilization, embodying values transcending time and change, and therefore out of the range of historical investigation. For this very reason, I made students grapple with early medieval monastic rules, conciliar decrees and books of penance, with the express intent to dislocate them from their placid sense of familiarity with a medieval past.

One of the most important challenges of those days was posed by Arnold Angenendt’s avalanche of stimulating publications on early medieval religion. It was with a mixture of fascination and uneasiness that I first read Angenendt’s portrayal of a religiosity from which ‘proper’ theology had all but disappeared.\(^21\) Fascination, for here was someone who knew Christianity inside out, and gave it the place it deserved in his work. Uneasiness as well, for to this wide-ranging scholar trained in the German tradition of Religionswissenschaft, ‘religion’ and ‘Christianity’ were apparently two different things. Angenendt’s frame of reference – elaborated in many important publications since\(^22\) – is one of ‘real Christianity’ versus the ‘archaizing


\(^{22}\) See Angenendt’s recent magnum opus *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 1997), which contains a full bibliography of his work. It was his ‘*Missa specialis. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Entstehung der Privatmessen*’, *Fruhmittelalterliche Studien* 17 (1983), pp. 155–221, which managed to reorient the entire direction of my dissertation.
tendencies' of early medieval religious life. For all my deep admiration for an historian to whom I feel much beholden, I found – and find – myself in total disagreement. To historians of antiquity ‘archaic’ may perhaps be a neutral concept, but whenever the notion crops up with regard to Christianity, it tends to be part of a contemporary Christian discourse, and of embarrassed efforts to come to terms with a type of Christianity which seems offensive to present-day religious ideals. My way of tackling the problem would be along the lines of Edmund Leach’s taunt to his colleagues in 1966: ‘If anthropologists are to justify their claim to be students of comparative religion, they need to be less polite. So far they have shown an extraordinary squeamishness about the analysis of Christianity and Judaism, religions in which they or their friends are deeply involved.’ The same goes for historians.

Utrecht, where I have taught since 1987, brought new challenges. For the first time I was confronted with an increasing number of students who had only the vaguest notion of what Christianity was all about. One mentioned Hannah and Samuel and looked at blank faces. With colleagues I therefore started a crash course in Christianity for future medievalists. What is the Bible, precisely, and how does the Mass work? Pilgrimage, penance, the cult of the saints? This was worlds apart from my Nijmegen experience, but it offered yet another invitation to revisit the foreign past: through the eyes of amazed newcomers. Again, the early Middle Ages were eminently suited to this exploration of the unfamiliar. Different students, different questions, and certainly a new lease of life for political history, inspired by Janet Nelson’s recent work on Charles the Bald.

The Utrecht experience has also been one of rapidly vanishing academic boundaries. In 1988, when I was preparing my inaugural lecture on early medieval literacy, Rosamond McKitterick kindly sent me the proofs of her Carolingians and the Written Word. The early Middle Ages have never been quite the same since. This book drove home forcefully the crucial message that texts did matter deeply in the Carolingian kingdoms. In her initial fervour McKitterick perhaps discovered literacy everywhere, but this was a healthy antidote to the doubt and sceptical lessons of Ganshof, which were part of the Amsterdam inheritance. McKitterick’s work also went a long way

---


24 A seminar on the politics of Charles the Bald led to a joint publication with undergraduates: M. de Jong, M.-T. Bos and C. van Rhijn (eds.), Macht en gezag in de negende eeuw (Hilversum, 1995).

towards demolishing antiquated notions about the divide between ‘clerical’ and ‘lay’ culture.\textsuperscript{26} Her later publications show a keen sensitivity to the symbolic force of texts in a world where the powerful tended to monopolize these scarce resources.\textsuperscript{27} Since the mid-1980s Anglophone scholarship in general, and British varieties thereof in particular, seemed to dominate an international group of early mediev-
alists in which people and ideas moved freely. In spite of the occasional rearguard fight, the days of pagan ‘survivals’ and ubiquitous ‘Germanic roots’ may finally be over.\textsuperscript{28} Ian Wood’s influential textbook on the Merovingian kingdoms (1994) does not even bother to mention \textit{Sakralkönigtum.}\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, it had now become possible to be an early medievalist and write about Christianity as an integral part of mainland history. In 1992 the journal \textit{Early Medieval Europe} was launched, as good a testimony as any to the liveliness of British early medieval scholarship. \textit{EME} operated as a much needed counterweight to the equally important, but more ideologically charged, German tradition. The two volumes of the so-called Bucknell group are good examples, among many, of this new nuts-and-bolts British approach to – and denial of – what is still called ‘institutional history’, at least in Germany.\textsuperscript{30}

Would all this lively early medieval scholarship have been possible without the achievements in the field of late antiquity? I rather doubt it, and I do not only have Peter Brown’s work in mind, but also that of Robert A. Markus. Here is yet another unconventional British scholar to whom we continentals owe so much. Markus’s \textit{End of Ancient Christianity} (1990) traced the change from a Christianity flourishing in


\textsuperscript{29} I.N. Wood, \textit{The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751} (London, 1994).


© Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1998 \textit{Early Medieval Europe} 1998 7 (3)
any given community, regardless of location, to a deeply territorialized religion bound to an infinite number of sacred places.\textsuperscript{31} In 1995 Peter Brown paid his debt to the early medieval west, the ‘Cinderella’ of the World of Late Antiquity,\textsuperscript{32} with his Rise of Western Christendom, which is in fact the rise of many early medieval micro-Christendoms which supposedly had little memory of the notion of universal Christianity. Brown discussed dispersed Christian communities where the notion of Rome – as opposed to the reality of the Roman Empire – nonetheless captured intellectual and religious imaginations, fired by seminal texts such as Isidore’s Etymologies.\textsuperscript{33} A Rome in the mind, reproduced in Christian islands throughout the post-Roman world. This book adds to, but also owes a lot to, Markus’s perceptive answers to the question: what changed between St Augustine and St Boniface? A familiarity with late antiquity apparently provides the best vantage point for spotting fundamental changes in subsequent centuries. More to the point: as specialists of late antiquity, Brown and Markus both set an inspiring rigorous standard for those wishing to rethink early medieval Christianity.

The five articles which follow all highlight the importance of Scripture to early medieval political cultures, lay as well as ecclesiastical. By doing so, they offer an implicit critique of several persistent grand narratives. One of these was recently rephrased by Peter Raedts, the present incumbent of the Nijmegen Chair of Medieval History. Arguing in favour of a new periodization, he proposed that the Middle Ages, which shaped our present-day institutions but also differs fundamentally from modernity, should run from roughly 1000 to 1800; the period before 1000 should be classified as ‘Antiquity’. After all, Raedts maintains, the culture of early medieval Europe was an oral one; moreover, slave labour persisted, cities were few and far between, and ‘the approach to life in general became much more rational in the eleventh century’.\textsuperscript{34} The fact that this journal would have to change its title is not the only reason why Raedts’s views seem unconvincing. Once more, the early Middle Ages are being turned into a sombre backdrop for the success story of Western culture – with Byzantium and Islam happily ignored, as usual. An equally tenacious grand narrative of medieval Christianity runs along similar lines. This is a tale not unlike Gibbon’s Decline and Fall. It runs along the lines of Original

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} R.A. Markus, The End of Ancient Christianity (Cambridge, 1990).
\item \textsuperscript{32} ‘SO Debate’, p. 23.
\end{itemize}
and Pristine Flourishing, Early Medieval Decline (but not quite a Fall) and then a glorious Resurrection in the twelfth-century ‘Flowering of the Middle Ages’. Curiously enough, the modern and the past narratives about ‘Original Christianity’ largely coincide. Carolingian intellectuals like Hrabanus Maurus spoke of the *vestigia maiorum*, which amounts to the same thing. The narratives run parallel, with early medieval and modern authors both maintaining that a ‘Real Christianity’ existed in the past – but with the notable difference that early medieval authors perceived the Old Testament as the truly authoritative past, the *vetus lex* to live by, whereas their later medieval and present-day colleagues look towards the Gospels and the Acts whenever they talk of Real Christianity. Yet this shift from early medieval adherence to the Old Testament, as source of law and history, to a new emphasis on the New Testament in general, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, is one of the most fundamental transformations within medieval Christianity. This transition Angenendt spotted early on, and he is right. It is hard to imagine the so-called popular heresies of the second half of the Middle Ages without the Gospels being interiorized on a much larger and unpredictable scale by groups of ordinary people intent on following both its letter and spirit. This new literal-mindedness went hand in hand with a break of trust between those mediating salvation and those at the receiving end, and with a fundamentally different sense of what *christianitas* was all about. Was it to be viewed as a realm correctly ordered, along early medieval lines of *correctio*, or a plethora of local textual communities, hell-bent on *imitatio Christi* and hang the consequences? Yet it remains to be seen whether this contrast is a viable approach to the problem. Were the early medieval worlds indeed so devoid of heresy and discontent, or did the *literati* of these societies seek to keep alive a dream of order by defining it in central texts? Are we perhaps still taken in by the powerful vision of order outlined in the *Admonitio generalis* and other capitularies, just as our early medieval predecessors were?

The papers published here deal with the specific nature of early

35 Angenendt, ‘Religiositäät und Theologie’.

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1998
medieval Christianity and its orientation towards the Old Testament. During the sessions in 1996 there were other concerns. For example, there was a strong awareness that authoritative texts, biblical books included, had been transmitted in a great variety of manuscripts, each characterized by individual features and purposes. This was stressed in the papers of Rosamond McKitterick, Richard Marsden, David Ganz and Marco Mostert. Thinking in terms of manuscripts, rather than editions, implies a sudden multiplication of ‘sources’. What precisely is ‘a text’ if variant manuscript traditions turn it into a moveable feast? A more manuscript-based approach to the study of early medieval Christianities is one of the ways to banish the skeleton of ‘Real Christianity’, along with its supposedly deviant early medieval manifestations, from the historical cupboard. A vast and largely unexplored territory of Carolingian biblical commentary is presently being mapped out. This is not merely indispensable groundwork, but also of vital importance to all engaged in rethinking the above-mentioned transformations of Christianity. Wherever manuscript work is becoming integrated into general historical scholarship, a consciousness of the actual transmission of Christian tradition guides more general approaches to problems of change and continuity. This has been one of the most promising developments of the past decade. Carolingian royal patronage of biblical commentary should indeed be taken seriously, for it was one of the ways in which rulers defined their role in society, but such research cannot succeed without in-depth study of the manuscript tradition of Carolingian biblical exegesis.

There are sub-narratives to the one about ‘Real Christianity’. One of these concerns the early medieval New Israels. The bond between king


and gens, which surely defined early medieval political unity, had its authoritative precedent in the Books of Kings, referred to time and again. Yet this identification turned out to be a lot more complex than I assumed in 1996. As Mary Garrison argues, early medieval elective affinities with the biblical past were more erratic, and therefore also more interesting. The *Admonitio generalis* is there, as an influential witness to a moment in history when a king identified with Josiah, who found the Book of Law and reformed his people. Yet the forceful image evoked by the *Admonitio* has also lured historians into a Franco-centric view of what the New Israel should be – as, no doubt, its authors intended. It was also a more ephemeral dream than we once suspected. Already in the 820s, the perspective of Carolingian intelligentsia shifted towards an ecclesia gentium, a new version of a universal church – within certain limits, for its boundaries were largely defined by the confines of ‘correct’ liturgy. This deceptively universal ecclesia was a notion eminently suited to an empire encompassing many gentes. Patristic rhetoric about the universal church was harnessed to the cause of Carolingian empire. This was the ninth-century ideal of an Apostolic church: gentes waiting out there to be incorporated into the Frankish Body of Christ. For all its deceptive size, the Carolingian empire operated much as a micro-Christendom.

The contributions to this issue of *EME* explore a territory peripheral to these great Carolingian visions, but therefore perhaps all the more important. The authors all take their point of departure from the initial question which bothered us in 1996: what was the impact of the Bible in general, and the Old Testament in particular, on early medieval societies? This is an issue which should occupy many historians in years to come, from the dual vantage point of the study of manuscripts and the history of ideas. The articles which follow form a modest contribution to this project for the new millennium. Each author focuses on worlds outside the self-aware Carolingian polity, which nonetheless helped to shape the notions embodied in the *Admonitio generalis*. Many tributaries flowed into the Carolingian mainstream. If this expression is too Franco-centric for some tastes, let it be clear

---

41 In the article included in this issue, and, more extensively, in ‘The Franks as the Elect? Education for an Identity from Pippin to Charlemagne’, in Y. Hen and M. Innes (eds.), *The Uses of the Past in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, forthcoming).
42 About its importance, see Staubach, ‘Cultus divinus’, and Contreni, ‘Carolingian Biblical Culture’.
that in this collection of essays we have chosen to privilege the tributaries. Ian Wood raises the spectre of ideas arising in specific political circumstances – people at a given moment in history being bothered by a very local and precise scandal, which subsequently extended to a general issue, giving rise to authoritative pronouncements. Would there have been any early medieval incest legislation exuberantly citing the Old Testament, without Bishop Euphronius being on the spot in Tours in 567 to promote the legacy of the Council of Epaon of 517? Would the later extensive legislation on incest ever have materialized without Epaon having become canonical through Euphronius’s efforts? Contingency is the enigma introduced by this paper, certainly for those who have pondered the ninth-century obsession with ‘incest’.45 Yitzhak Hen re-examines Wallace-Hadrill’s celebrated dictum of ‘kingship moving into an ecclesiastical sphere’, and finds that it applies to the Merovingian kings of the second half of the seventh century. He concentrates on the contrast between the subtle letter of admonishment of Clovis II and the belligerent liturgy emerging in the same period. Hen concludes that lay preferences shaped the liturgical prayers highlighting kings who led their people into battle, and raises an old issue: Christianization as a phenomenon of acculturation, with lay expectations determining liturgical practice as much as clerical ones.46 A Celtic scholar, Bart Jaski, examines what the Irish – allegedly the most Old Testament-minded of all early medieval peoples – were really up to when they incorporated biblical law with regard to regnal succession. His answer: conscious harmonization of indigenous and Old Testament law, without any real concession to the latter. Biblical law was a frame of reference supporting and enhancing native traditions, to be exploited or ignored as appropriate. Mary Garrison applies her knowledge of the early medieval epistolary genre to the ‘almost liturgical’ letters addressed by two insular peregrini to continental rulers: Clemens – or is it Peregrinus? – who wrote to Duke Tassilo, and Cathuulf’s celebrated letter to Charlemagne. Both drew heavily upon Old Testament history and law, and both were produced at a time when papal rhetoric about the Franks as the Elect had fallen silent. Garrison points out how similar the ideas current at the Agilolfing court in the 770s were to those dominating its Carolingian adversary in

the 780s; both were ‘crucially indebted to the biblical culture of insular peregrini’. Biblical models of the bond between the king and his people were central to these insular perspectives. This is the topic which Rob Meens broaches, finally, with the Irish tract De duodecim abusivis saeculi, but also with Cathuulf in mind. Meens explores the Old Testament notion of the cosmological interconnectedness of king and people, with reference to Mary Douglas and her view that religious statements were ‘tightly encoded messages that regulated social interaction’. A cosmology in which the people suffered if the king was iniquus, and rivers overflowed if a king was forced to do public penance – where did it come from, and did it persist in the Carolingian realm? Meens traces the persistence of such ideas from the Irish world to the Carolingian monastic authors like Smaragdus, and to the capitulary of 805 which summoned the people to fasting and prayer in order to ward off disaster. As he did in earlier publications, Meens weighs the limits and possibilities of Douglas’s thought for those seeking to understand early medieval Christianities, and concludes that her model continues to offer an inspiring perspective.

These are papers which open up further possibilities of research – in other words, they offer a story with an open end. When all is said and done, we should agree with Bart Jaski’s conclusion concerning the Irish: ‘On the whole the Irish seem to have looked at the Old Testament as a treasure-trove of legal guidelines and political information, but they read it through their own eyes and used it in a creative way, without trying to force its unfamiliar elements on their own culture.’ This seems as good a point of departure as any for exploring the impact of the Bible on early medieval societies. We should think of these societies not as so many well-defined New Israels, but from the perspective of the elective and unpredictable affinities of new political communities with an authoritative biblical past.

University of Utrecht

47 As Peter Brown expressed it; cf. ‘SO Debate’, p. 21.
48 I am grateful to my fellow contributors to this issue for their comments on earlier versions of this text, and furthermore to Leslie Brubaker, Philippe Buc, Matthew Innes, Rosamond McKitterick, Marco Mostert, Barbara Rosenwein, Julia Smith, Alan Thacker and Chris Wickham. I have not heeded all the sound advice offered, but have learned a lot from it.