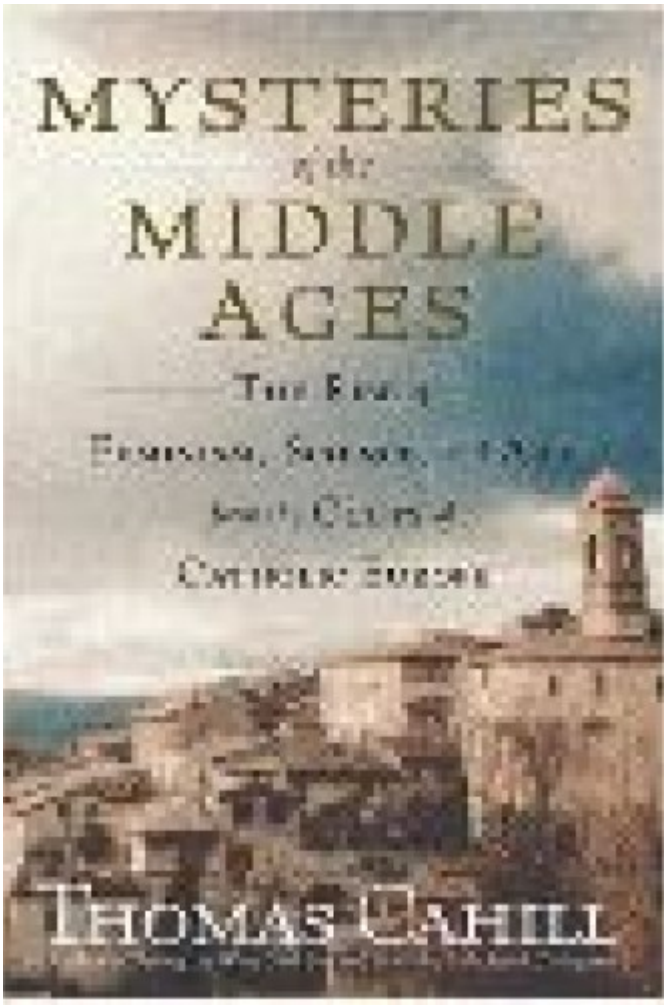
Mysteries of the Middle Ages

reviewed by Sharan Newman in the January 23, 2007 issue

In Review



Mysteries of the Middle Ages: The Rise of Feminism, Science, and Art from the Cults of Catholic Europe

Thomas Cahill
Doubleday

At the beginning of the third section of *Mysteries of the Middle Ages* Thomas Cahill states, “The Middle Ages are a great jumble. As I have put my manuscript together, I have sometimes felt I was not so much writing a book as sewing a gigantic quilt, full of disparate and even clashing remnants.” Unfortunately the result is decidedly flawed, with some pieces badly basted in and others missing entirely, leaving gaping holes in the material.

Mysteries of the Middle Ages is part of Cahill’s “hinges of history” series, which began with *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. His laudable goal is to demonstrate how times and places denigrated by recent historians have contributed a great deal to the formation of the modern world. Now, he has decided, it’s time to show that the Middle Ages weren’t a backward, dark era in history. The problem is that Cahill does not seem to know anything about the Middle Ages. While he corrects a few common misconceptions, such as the belief that everyone thought Earth was flat, he repeats many more myths: that no one bathed, that almost everyone died before the age of 30 and that the average height was five feet, for example.

Cahill begins the Middle Ages with the emperor Constantine in AD 312—a bit early for most historians—and spends the first chapter extolling the world of Alexandria and the Greeks. He then moves to Rome, which he tells us was saved from barbarism by the Christian bishops. But they couldn’t do it all. Cahill laments the loss of Aristotelian logic and the rise of Neoplatonism under the philosopher Plotinus, whose writing is “virtually impenetrable.” The fact that Plotinus was popular in the Middle Ages is just one of many things that Cahill dislikes about the period.

The volume continues with minibiographies of notable people of the times, beginning with the 12th century, before which were the Dark Ages. He gives the most attention to Hildegard of Bingen, Heloise and Abelard, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Thomas Aquinas and Francis of Assisi. The stories are interspersed with confused discussions of the “courts of love,” the Crusades, why southern Europe is better than the north, what’s wrong with Islam and how Roger Bacon was really quite modern except for his “medieval” belief in astrology. Cahill ends with Dante and Giotto, whom he likes, but with reservations.

All of these are interesting subjects, but all of them have been written about elsewhere in a more complete and coherent manner. Cahill puts none of them into the context of the times. It’s as though the accomplished people he writes about

were isolated individuals fighting against the strictures of the backward society they lived in. I am left with the simple impression that Hildegard was a soul sister of Bessie Smith and that Eleanor was a sex addict who had numerous affairs. Cahill dismisses the work of Aquinas as “irrelevant” and asserts that Dante is important because he was brave enough to criticize popes. Cahill fails to discuss the dynamic society these individuals lived in and to show how they fit into it.

Throughout the book are comments that show Cahill’s contempt for the Middle Ages and the people of that time. Medieval people had a “superstitious reverence for the stars” and a “pagan nightmare of a world of shapeshifters.” Religious controversies came to violence because of “slogan-reciting mobs of simple-minded monks.” This shouldn’t be surprising since Cahill seems to believe that monasteries were created in order to keep wandering ruffians under control.

Cahill portrays Hildegard as a poor, repressed woman forced into a convent as a child. Her work, though creative, is “page after page of stultifying orthodoxy . . . not far distant from pious drivel.” Her medical writing is “as useless to us as the rest of medieval medicine.” What he admires most about her is the many letters she wrote to religious leaders, nagging them to shape up. This is a key to what I suspect is Cahill’s real theme.

I say “suspect” because this book is such a muddle that any points Cahill might have wanted to make are lost. His lack of understanding of the period is one drawback. He is supposed to know Latin well enough to read material in its original language, but I don’t see any sign of depth of research. His pronouncements about the period are not footnoted, so his sources cannot be checked. He does have a system of side notes, but these only give more of his opinions or direct readers to his other books.

In the concluding chapter Cahill does not gather up the scattered swatches of information in the preceding pages. Instead he launches into a diatribe against present Catholic Church officials’ failure to adequately deal with the problem of pederastic priests. My conclusion is that he chose as subjects people he saw as rebels against church complacency. To him Hildegard, Abelard, St. Francis and Dante are lay individuals who fought against ecclesiastical corruption. The book is a call to lay Catholics of today to follow their example and clean up the church.

I really wanted to like this book. The past 40 years have seen marvelous developments in the study of the Middle Ages. Almost none of the new theories and

discoveries have reached the general public. We need a good popular history that shows the diversity and vibrancy of the times. This isn't it. Two well-written books that counter many of the myths that Cahill perpetuates are Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Strong of Body, Brave and Noble: Chivalry and Society in Medieval France* (Cornell University Press, 1998); and Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Inventing the Flat Earth: Columbus and Modern Historians* (Praeger, 1991). On Cahill's "rise of feminism," read instead Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* (Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1995). And on Hildegard, try Barbara Newman, *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (University of California Press, 1998).

Should you receive a copy of Cahill's book as a gift, I suggest that you enjoy the multitude of beautiful illustrations. For accurate information on Hildegard, Francis, Dante, Eleanor and Giotto, stick to the work of serious scholars.