

Richard, Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*

(London: Penguin, 1990)

In this important work, Professor Sir Richard Southern investigates the interplay between the Medieval Church and the secular society in which it had become supreme. The distinguished medieval scholar marshals a plethora of evidence to show that Church and society were bound together and that over the course of the centuries, it rose and began a slide into the crisis of the Reformation. He examines the structures of the Church within a logical framework and makes a massive subject comprehensible with persuasive argument and fine writing.

Professor Sir Richard Southern (1912–2001) was a medievalist from the University of Oxford in England. Acknowledged by most historians as one of the most important scholars of the Middle Ages, his work concentrated upon the development of thought, faith and humanism in this period. His first work, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953), is a seminal work into the changes, intellectual and political, occurring in early Medieval Europe. Subsequent works included *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe: Foundations* (1995), *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (1962), studies of St Anselm and Robert Grossteste and this work, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*.

Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages is the second book in the *Penguin History of the Church* series, and covers the period from eighth to the sixteenth century. Professor Southern first gives a broad overview of the three ages of the Church in this period and then proceeds to discuss various aspects of the church. He begins with a discussion of the divisions within the Christian Church and the interactions between the Western and Eastern Church that inexorably led to the breakdown of relations between the two despite pressing reasons on both sides to maintain relations. Professor Southern then turns to the internal divisions within the Roman Church beginning with the Papacy and moving down through the bishops and secular clergy, the monastic and other

religious orders and ultimately to the fringe orders and the beginnings of dissent in the Church.

Each of these subjects is examined with regard to the three ages Professor Southern previously identified. This gives a structure to the work and allows a better grasp of the issues both within a structural and temporal framework. This is particularly important given the complex interplays between the different groups and different periods, and is a logical choice on the author's part.

A main thrust of Professor Southern's argument in this work is this interplay between different groups. The tale he tells is that of a complex web of factors that grew beyond the Church itself to influence and be influenced by secular society. Professor Southern argues that whether the Church liked it or not, and whether they admitted it, in this period they had become inextricably bound to the secular world. Many other works on the Church of the period attempt to investigate the Church in a vacuum, concentrating upon theology and internal developments, yet Professor Southern maintains this is giving only part of the story.

In the early period covered by this work, there was little power or authority in secular society. Nation states as we know them today did not exist, petty kingdoms squabbled and princes lived short brutal lives. The Church filled the vacuum, becoming by the twelfth century the supreme power in Europe. Yet this supremacy itself became a burden to the Church, leading to internal corruption and a questioning of the Church's role in society. Professor Southern contends that in effect, the Church became its own worst enemy, stultifying and refusing to respond to these internal currents. The author is thus setting up and explaining the situation in the Church that would ultimately lead to the disaster of the Reformation.

Professor Southern does not concentrate upon the theology of the Church except when the theology informs the relationships within the Church and between the Church and society. He thus discusses the arguments over creed that split the Roman and Orthodox Churches, yet he maintains that even these arguments of faith should not be seen in isolation, that political factors were as important. Throughout, Professor Southern maintains the view of the Church as a political entity.

Professor Southern supports his arguments with frequent and informed use of primary sources. Given his emphasis upon the political nature of the Church within society, there is little use of theological sources, but he uses a broad variety of other sources. Professor Southern makes particularly effective use of papal letters and other documents from the papal curia that provide an enlightening insight into the thoughts of the leadership of the Church. Scholarly works related to the Church, by Thomas Aquinas among others, are also cited, and used with care and to good effect.

The medieval period saw the blooming of chronicles that gave a view from the scholars in society. Professor Southern uses these chroniclers expertly. Those by such as Richard of Devizes are tapped for a view of the relationship between the Church and society, while he uses the chronicles of Jocelin of Brakelond and other churchmen to give a view of the Church from within. Yet, Professor Southern understands that these sources, while fascinating, are individual viewpoints, and ultimately must be viewed critically and within context. When the author cites sources, they are well chosen and always put within perspective.

Professor Southern uses this broad range of sources to back up all of his arguments and critical points, and

makes his case convincingly. Yet his thesis is made more persuasive by his own masterly command of the subject and the way in which he synthesizes all of this information and all of the arguments into a satisfying whole. Whenever a question is posed, Professor Southern attacks the question, speculating and considering the evidence and reaching a conclusion when he can, and if he cannot reach a firm conclusion on a particular question, he is not afraid to admit the ambiguity. Yet, overall, his arguments hold together well and make a convincing thesis.

It would be hard to discuss a work by Professor Southern without discussing his writing style. Professor Southern has a very accessible and elegant style. He is not afraid to use humor, his grasp of language is impeccable and his grammar faultless. He makes this work a pleasure to read and extremely easy to digest despite the complexities of the subject.

Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages is an ideal text for anyone interested in the rich interplay between the Church and society in the turbulent period of the Middle Ages. The accessibility of the book makes it suitable for college students and amateur historians, while the details, the research and the depth with which Professor Southern addresses these issues make it equally valuable to more advanced students. He uses a variety of primary evidence and compelling argument to make a convincing case that the interaction between Church and state had a profound impact on both, and that pressures within the Church because of these interactions would lead to both its blossoming and decline. This work confirms Professor Southern as one of the premier medieval historians of the twentieth century, and one of the most accomplished authors of history texts in recent years.