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## The Rise of Western Christendom

### Triumph and Diversity,

A.D. 200–1000

Peter Brown

Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition

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## Preface to the Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition

This book is a reprint of a book with a history. It is a history of curiosity and of growing excitement. I first wrote it in the form of a relatively short essay (virtually without footnotes) which appeared in 1996 as part of the series *Faire l'Europe: The Making of Europe*, directed by Jacques le Goff.

Over the next few years, however, I realized that I could hear behind me the roar of a dam burst. A remarkable surge of publications, of new discoveries and of new and daring perspectives was under way. It ensured that the centuries associated with the end of the Roman empire and the first centuries of the western Middle Ages (between 200 and 1000 A.D.) – previously dismissed as the “Dark” Ages – looked very different from how they had done before. New views had emerged, lively controversies had arisen concerning the rise of Christianity, the fall of the Roman empire, the origin and expansion of Islam, the conversion to Christianity of northern Europe and the establishment of the empire of Charlemagne. I needed to dive back into the flood and bring these changes in modern scholarship to the attention of readers in an expanded account. This was fully equipped with footnotes and bibliography, so that they also could dive in and join in the fun.

Hence what was called a Second Edition of the book appeared in 2002. It was considerably more than a mere re-edition. The title apart, it was a new book. But the surge in scholarship has continued unabated. It is only proper to pause once again to take breath. In this preface, I will sum up some recent arguments and make available, from the continued, mighty flood of publications, an inevitably short selection of recent works. I hope that readers will find these works helpful to continue the exploration of what has remained a hotly debated period. I do this so as to encourage readers to wander even more widely in this rapidly evolving and creative field. There

Richard Cross has written a clear and engaging guide to the emergence of medieval philosophy in the Latin Christian West. Beginning with the consolidation of the inheritance of antiquity (roughly 1050–1200), Cross traces the development of philosophical thought in its successive phases: the assimilation of new translations of Aristotle and his commentators (1200–77); the refinement of the neo-Aristotelian synthesis (1277–1300); and its re-evaluation (1300–50). Anselm, Abelard, Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham are key players, of course, but they are contextualized in their social and intellectual milieu, so that the contributions of Grosseteste, Bacon, Albert, Henry of Ghent, Godfrey of Fontaines, Peter Auriol, and many others are recognized as well. With insight and grace, Cross discusses the philosophical topics that motivated these thinkers: the problem of universals, the nature of scientific knowledge, the relation of the soul to the body, the mechanisms of human cognition, divine power and foreknowledge, and much else besides. This masterly presentation is lucid and accessible, providing beginners and specialists alike with a thorough account of the period, enlivened by Cross's erudition and wit.

*Peter King, Professor of Philosophy and of  
Medieval Studies, University of Toronto*

Richard Cross's book provides a lucid introduction to the accepted great figures of medieval philosophy – Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, Scotus and Ockham – beautifully nuanced treatments of a number of more minor figures and, despite the deliberately old-fashioned choice of material, an important new perspective on it. Cross's presentation is outstanding because, although most of the men he considers were theologians, he treats them, rightly, as doing philosophy of the highest order. Without technical jargon and always in a way fully comprehensible to a beginner, Cross engages philosophically with these thinkers' positions and arguments, so that the reader comes to understand not just what they thought, but the reasons for which they thought it. His big innovation – foreshadowed in much recent specialized work, but never stated so clearly as here – is to see the half-century or so immediately *after* the lifetime of Aquinas as the great period of discovery and achievement in medieval philosophy, with Duns Scotus the pre-eminent philosopher, and Ockham as providing a radical simplification, which however left him and his followers unable to answer fundamental metaphysical questions. I would strongly recommend this book to any student looking for a sober, clear, elegant and stimulating introduction to the recognized great medieval philosopher-theologians.

*John Marenbon, senior research fellow,  
Trinity College, Cambridge*

Richard Cross's highly intelligent treatment slides easily between historical context and doctrinal exposition, both to orient students to a challenging period and to acquaint contemporary Christian philosophers with the formidable range and creativity of their medieval predecessors. Besides individual chapters on his 'top four' – Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham – Cross includes substantial discussions of authors rather less studied: Gilbert of Poitiers, Peter John Olivi, Giles of Rome, Hervaeus Natalis and Peter Auriol, among others, the better to provoke more work on such important medieval thinkers.

*Marilyn McCord Adams, Distinguished Visiting Professor  
of Philosophy, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey,  
and formerly Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Oxford*

# THE MEDIEVAL CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS AN INTRODUCTION



RICHARD CROSS

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## Preface

This book aims to cover a huge amount of material, and it attempts to do so in a manageable kind of way. So I have had to make some hard choices. I start at 1050 – reasonably thought of as the beginning of the scholastic period, as I outline in the Introduction. But for reasons that I explain in my final chapter, I have basically taken 1350 as my cut-off date. There is a great deal that could be said about the later period; but, apart from a brief discussion of Wyclif, it will not be said here. Equally, I have treated merely of Western Christian philosophy, against the prevailing trend of seeing medieval philosophy not merely as an international affair but as an intercontinental one. To this, I say merely that I do not want to write on things that I do not know enough about. I know well enough how the Latin translations of Arabic writers were received by the Latin speakers of the West, for example; but I do not know Arabic, beyond the little it has in common with Syriac, and cannot comment on the relation between the translations and the original texts; or, indeed, on the philosophy of the thinkers themselves. The translations are another matter: philosophical texts in their own right, authored partly by their Arabic originators, but hijacked and transformed, consciously or not, skilfully or recklessly, by their translators. And it is these texts that were of relevance in the West, the topic of my study here.

In some ways, then, I have ended up writing a rather more old-fashioned book than I had anticipated – and not just in terms of my timescale. It is not without reason, for example, that Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham are often highlighted as the greatest of the medieval philosophers; and I think it makes for more philosophically interesting reading (and writing) to structure the text around these thinkers. But, of course, focusing on ‘big’ thinkers – those thinkers judged great with the benefit of hindsight, judged by the light of history – is anachronistic, for all its philosophical wealth, and it is in this way that my text has come out rather traditional, somehow falling into the inheritance of twentieth-century historiographies

# THE MIDDLE AGES

Johannes Fried

*Translated by Peter Lewis*

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# Medieval Christianity

A NEW HISTORY



KEVIN MADIGAN

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To my students

*Discipulis meis eximius*

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# A SHORT HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

G. R. Evans

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