



King John and Religion,
Paul Webster
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If Queen Elizabeth I really did not wish for windows to see into men's souls, she was being wise. One's religious beliefs and outward piety and one's actions do not necessarily match up neatly. After all, Adolf Hitler was a saintly choirboy and Stalin trained as a seminarian. How much harder, then, to delve back eight centuries to peer intensely into King John's soul and to investigate his spirituality. Could such a palpably bad man (there is little serious academic disagreement or compunction over issuing that moral verdict) still be a pious king? Perhaps because historians have had so many of John's juicy sins to pore over, the question of his personal and monarchical religion has not previously received a full-length monograph. Paul Webster puts this right in an extremely important book that Johannine scholars will be citing for a very long time.

Webster's comprehensive treatment of the subject makes it all the more perplexing that this area has not received such thorough treatment before. John's reported disrespect and poor regard for matters of faith; the great clash with the Papacy leading to Interdict and excommunication; John's exploitation of the Church in England; the subsequent settlement and submission of the kingdom as a papal fief; and John's personal religious habits and proclivities – all these areas are rich seams to mine and Webster has tunnelled deep to collect some nuggets. Of course, all but the last of these have attracted considerable scholarly attention in papers (including Webster's own), but in bringing all these topics together in a focused overview, supported by insightful original research, Webster demonstrates just what a huge and exciting topic this is and just why a volume such as this is so needed.

The cycle of Johannine revisionism and counter-revisionism turns once again here, as Webster offers a more positive view of John than current consensus would generally allow. He constructs a well-made case for John's conventional piety, for John, no fool in his intermittently lucid moments, pragmatically attempted to combine the demands of the spiritual world with the hard practicalities of the temporal one. As Webster shows, John was well aware of the profound symbolic meaning of adhering to expected religious forms and rituals in display to emphasise the aura surrounding authority.

Webster asks the question: "To what extent did [John] engage with the ritual of the mass?" (19). The well-known depiction of John attending masses in the *Life of St Hugh of Lincoln* would suggest that he did so with reluctance, telling of the king hurrying the celebrant along (Webster dryly notes that John was not that interested in listening to lengthy sermons about good and bad kingship) and not receiving communion on Easter Sunday or Ascension Day or even, if our critical source is to be believed, during his corona-

tion mass. During the interdict of 1208 to 1213 he should not have received it at all. Webster meticulously records John's provisions for chapels and chantry masses as evidence for the king's seriousness towards celebrating mass appropriately in just the way one would expect from a medieval monarch. In a similar vein, John understandably played the political game of ecclesiastical patronage, as he did arguably in his 1192 endowment of Lichfield, where Bishop Hugh de Nonant was a key ally to the royal prince.

In another chapter, Webster scrutinises John's invocation of the saints for much-needed intercessory aid. Again, royal pilgrimage and devotion to the saints was wholly conventional: "John emulated his Anglo-Norman and Angevin predecessors and responded to the needs of the moment" (42). The foremost Canterbury cult of St Thomas Becket did not seem to cause any embarrassment or awkwardness for him, despite his father's alleged culpability in the saint's death. St Edmund and St Edward the Confessor received equal attention as royal cults, and St Wulfstan of Worcester, canonised during John's reign, was understandably a personal favourite of the king. His dealings with Westminster paid dividends in the Magna Carta civil war and consequent French invasion, the abbey staying loyal to him, while Reading Abbey, a focus of John's active veneration of relics, remembered his soul in their prayers. In his chapter on monasteries, Webster sees penitential motives for John's foundation of the Cistercian abbey at Beaulieu, the establishment of which "could be used to emphasise or restate his God-given status as king" (83). Given Archbishop Hubert Walter's involvement in the project and the dating of its foundation (by 1204), I wonder if any penitential impulses were prompted by John's almost certain hand in the suspected murder of his nephew, Arthur of Brittany? Beaulieu's abbot, Hugh, handled much of John's public relations, especially in diplomatic missions to the continent, and its prior gathered supplies for John's men during the Magna Carta civil war.

The Angevins were arguably English royalty's most dysfunctional family, and John was perhaps the most disloyal of the whole brood, but "his family-related religious activity was dictated by inherited obligations which he was expected to maintain" (93) – often through gritted teeth, one suspects. However, as Webster wryly observes, John may have preferred not to commemorate his brother Geoffrey, father of Arthur. In the following chapter, Webster argues that John went beyond conventional piety when it came to charity and alms-giving, and was generous in this regard, suggesting the king's "concern to accumulate 'good works' to stand in his favour at the Last Judgment" (129). He also notes that John was not so keen on any accompanying fasting as he lacked willpower; he is recorded as increasing his alms-giving when failing to fast, by way of expiation. Webster also notes John followed the Angevins' 'respect for holy men'; perhaps the wandering preacher Peter of Wakefield was not holy enough as John had him executed for prophesying his downfall.

The next two chapters focus on the more familiar grounds of John's tortuous relationships with the institutional Church, but all covered with a fresh eye and revealing analysis. For example, Webster's treatment of John's ecclesiastical taxation from 1210 convinces me that this was a crucial period in damning John's already poor reputation. John was right to be suspicious of Stephen Langton, Pope Innocent III's choice for the new Archbishop of Canterbury: though not mentioned here, Stephen's brother Simon was in the pay of Prince Louis, heir to the Capetian crown. Webster is sensibly open to the idea that the clash with Rome may have led John to consider negotiations with the North African emir, Muhammad al-Nasir. This is possible: after all, Francis I and William of Orange were open to Muslim alliances. Besides, John was willing to support the alleged heretic Count Raymond of Toulouse against the crusaders in southern France (some analysis of this would have been welcome).

Webster sums things up nicely when he writes: "John handled the Canterbury crisis with characteristically misplaced confidence" (197). But for all John's eventual humiliating submission to the Papacy in 1213, it should be made clear that it was the English military victory at Damme that prevented the (initially papal-backed) French invasion. Webster is rightly suspicious of John's motivations in taking up the cross for the crusade; here he might have been more forthright: John would never have left his fissiparous kingdom (after all, when his brother Richard went on crusade, John himself had attempted to usurp the throne). The last chapter deals with John's death and beyond. John knew he had sinned more than most, and took some extra precautions for the afterlife. A sign of his failure as king can be gauged by the fact that he could not be buried with his Angevin family at Fontevraud or at his choice of Beaulieu Abbey: both were in territory he had lost to the enemy.

The bulk of this essential volume's contents has much that can be deemed ground-breaking; it is a truly excellent book which will be invaluable to students and scholars of John's reign, and also to those of the English medieval church.

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