

Zubin Mistry, *Abortion in the Early Middle Ages c.500-900*, Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2015. £60.00, 978 1 903153 57 4 (hardback), pp. xiv + 342.

How was abortion constructed as a social, religious and political problem by individuals and communities, and the ecclesiastic and secular authorities in the Early Middle Ages? This is the focus of Zubin Mistry's monograph, *Abortion in the Early Middle Ages c.500-900*. The text provides an analysis of doctrine from across time and space in Europe over this period, including Visigothic Spain, Merovingian Gaul, early Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England and the Carolingian empire, demonstrates the slow movement of church tradition. There was not unified moral, religious and political thought on abortion, but rather it was a topic that was actively debated along with related concerns such as sexuality, contraception and gender. As Mistry argues, 'The Early Middle Ages was not a historical courier which delivered a sealed moral doctrine from Augustine to Gratian' (p.55). Mistry reminds us that when abortion was being spoken of by churchmen and rulers they may have drawn on the past, but they were speaking in the present tense.

The text offers a detailed analysis of key texts from the period, from conventional sources such as canon law, penitential literature, and law-codes. But it also examines other sources, such as biblical commentaries, theological treatises, texts regarding political controversy and polemical letters. In analysing such texts, Mistry argues that the book presents a narrative of the stories of abortion that communities told themselves, demonstrating what abortion signified. Due to the nature of the period and the sources available, this book offers a study of political, moral, legal, and religious doctrine of abortion, rather than the practice of abortion during the period. Mistry is forthright in acknowledging that the experiences of women are discussed not only by male-authored texts, but by specific men – notably clerks and monks. Furthermore, most of the stories of the period are hidden, as are the accounts of 'ordinary people' and what they thought about abortion and about churchmen's ideas on abortion (p.299).

Mistry demonstrates the extent to which perspectives on abortion fed into the complex social, cultural and political agendas of the period, for example sixth-century Gaul abortion was integrated within attempts to define Christian communities, whereas in Visigothic Spain rhetoric on abortion represented convergence between church and state.

The success of Mistry's work is that it demonstrates the array of perspectives – analysis of the vast number of sources presented provides an indication of the complex mosaic of differing perspectives that existed around the topic, not just across the vast time period and location, but within specific periods and jurisdictions. A difficulty of this book is that it presupposes an understanding of the period and the religious and political developments in Europe at this time. Consequently, it is not immediately accessible to those who are specifically interested in a history of abortion and who may well be unfamiliar to the early middle ages period. Nevertheless, Mistry's comprehensive writing style and the structure of the book facilitates understanding and offers an interesting insight into perspectives on abortion during the period. This book will be of great interest to those who are interested in the political and cultural history of the church and state during this period. It will also be of interest to those who are concerned with historic representations of abortion.

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