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# Review of The Church, the Councils, and Reform: The Legacy of the Fifteenth Century

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Gerald Christianson, Thomas Izbicki, and Christopher M. Bellitto, eds. *The Church, the Councils, and Reform: The Legacy of the Fifteenth Century*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008. xvi + 336 pp. index. \$79.95. ISBN: 978-0-8132-1527-3.

This very welcome collection of essays on the councils and conciliar thought from the Council of Constance through the Council of Trent (1414–1563) is the fruit not only of a conference sponsored by the American Cusanus Society and the International Seminar on Pre-Reformation Theology of Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary in 2004, but also of a rich stream of research initiated by Brian Tierney with his publication of *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory* in 1955. The essays included here represent some of the contributions of the generations that have followed his pathbreaking work.

The volume is divided into four parts, each tied together by helpful introductions by Christianson and Izbicki. In a section on “Historical Perspectives” Nelson H. Minnich’s survey of the “Councils of the Catholic Reformation” provides an overview of the whole period and raises important issues in current historiography. Emily O’Brien studies Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini’s writings on his experience at the Council of Basel, presenting him as an important humanist source on conciliar thought who has been overlooked by both historians of the councils and historians of humanism. Francis Oakley presents a fascinating appraisal of the oblivion into which conciliar thought collapsed in the nineteenth century in the face of an “imperial papacy.”

In a section on “Sources” David Zachariah Flanagan examines the place of the Bible in the thought of Jean Gerson in order to demonstrate that the origins of conciliarism are to be found not only in canon law texts but also in sacred scripture itself. He cites Gerson in a sermon to the pope: “Scripture is certainly sufficient for the governing of the church; else Christ would have been an imperfect legislator” (105). Michiel Decaluwe argues that due to the lack of an authoritative text of the Council of Constance’s decree *Haec Sancta* it is necessary to look to the works of two of the most prominent figures in that council, Francis Zabarella and Jean Gerson, in order to understand the council’s efforts to find a broadly acceptable solution to its need to explain its legitimacy and to heal the schism. Natacha-Ingrid Tinteroff provides a theological analysis of the role of the Holy Spirit in the convoking of a general council and of enabling a council to “represent” the universal church. Jovino Miroy argues for a consistent development in the thought of Nicholas of Cusa between his *Catholic Concordance*, when he was a participant in the Council of Basel, and his *On Learned Ignorance*.

“Challenges” to conciliarism are presented in part 3. Morimichi Watanabe examines how Pope Eugenius IV’s struggles over the convocation and proceedings of the Council of Basel made him an “obstacle to conciliarism” (193). J. H. Burns studies the work of a staunch opponent of the Council of Pisa and Milan (1511–12), Angelo da Vallombrosa. This man was so adamantly papalist that he viewed the work of another better-known defender of the papacy, Cardinal

Cajetan, as inadequate in his critique of the Council of Pisa-Milan. Jesse D. Mann, in an intriguing example of the intersection of conciliar thought and late medieval Mariology, examines John of Segovia's rejection of a commonly held view that only Mary retained the faith at the Crucifixion when the other apostles had abandoned her son and that therefore she alone was the Church for a brief time. That one person could embody the entire church was antithetical to the corporate nature of conciliar thought.

In a fourth section on the applications of conciliar thought in local situations Günter Hägele and Friedrich Pukelsheim examine Nicholas of Cusa's systems of elections for emperor and ecclesiastical officials as an example of conciliar interest in authority and consent. David S. Peterson offers the fascinating example of how the clergy of Florence in the early fifteenth century sought a conciliar approach to local church governance and that just as conciliarism in general suffered defeat at the hands of a unified papacy so too did the republican spirit of the Florentine clergy wane in the face of the centralizing power of the local Archbishop. Giuseppe Alberigo reflects on the identity and significance of Conciliarism, especially in the thought of Nicholas of Cusa, and emphasizes the remote origins of conciliar thought and practice. Christopher M. Bellitto addresses the popular misconceptions of the councils of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance and Vatican Council II as they are both expressed and informed by the secular and the Catholic press. He finds a tendency to draw a sharp dichotomy between the earlier, supposedly less imaginative and more thoroughly hierarchical councils and Vatican II that is not consistent with the findings of current research on the councils. The volume concludes appropriately with an afterword by Brian Tierney reflecting on conciliar studies over the last fifty years.

The essays in this volume attest to the extraordinary contribution made by scholars over the last fifty years to our understanding of the richness of conciliar thought and practice in medieval and early modern Christianity, the fecundity of that thought for other areas of culture, and the potential for conciliar thought to influence the formation and reformation of communities today. This significant book will be a great value to scholars and students alike.

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Robert Alexander Maryks. *Saint Cicero and the Jesuits: The Influence of the Liberal Arts on the Adoption of Moral Probabilism.*

Biblioteca Instituti Historici Societatis Iesu 64. Catholic Christendom, 1300–1700. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008. 168 pp. index. tpls. bibl. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6293-8.

This book has a fascinating thesis: that the preference of Jesuit confessors for “probabilism” in solving cases of conscience (for which they have been so much maligned since Pascal) has its roots not in opposition to the moral severity of