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Review Essay: Moore, R. I. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*

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he could have made by arguing from a broader basis would show. It is hard to question his commonsense argument that works that implicitly discuss literacy cannot very well be oral. It is easy, however, to question the etiology, meaning, and effects Lerer assigns to 'literate' literature, as well as the validity and sufficiency of his critical philosophy.

Lerer remains old fashioned in spite of his eclectic debt to contemporary criticism. He preserves a reader struggling with language as the ordering principle in a meaningless world. Even God survives as cryptic 'textuality'. Locating meaning in mysteriously autonomous linguistic mechanisms, however, verges on verbal idolatry; and gratuitous 'new historical' debunking of yesterday's religion into today's social mechanisms of desire and power does not advance his argument.

These philosophical shortcomings entail methodological weaknesses, and literacy engages the evolution of consciousness, what C. S. Lewis has called, in *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1964 p 42), 'the psychological history of the West'. Literacy is first a result, then a cause; it cannot explain itself, or even the ideological uses to which it might be put, since it is only one of the many co-conditioned concomitants of rationalism-materialism; but Lerer does not draw upon the wide literature dealing with the complex cyclical reappearance of literacy in western cultures.

In spite of its prolixity, technical deficiencies, and impertinent cultural warfare, however, Lerer's book should — if any book can — resolve the questions. Much Old English literature is about reading and writing and, therefore, ought to be literate.

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Moore, R. I. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1990. viii + 168 pp. \$42.95 / \$21.95.

The Formation of a Persecuting Society contests a number of current scholarly interpretations concerning the causes and significance of persecution in the high medieval west. Moore rejects outright the conventional characterization of persecution as somehow inevitable or natural in medieval society, the product of inherent social fears or simply the random acts of private individuals. Rather he sees persecution emerging after AD 1000 as a deliberate systematic repression of specific categories of people targeted by the ruling élites of church and state. Prior to the eleventh century, according to Moore, groups such as Jews, heretics, lepers, and homosexuals were not subject to such concerted attacks.

Why the sudden change? The author locates the basic cause in a major shift in the character of high medieval society, part of a general transition from local feudalized ways of life to more centralized regimes that sought to legitimize their political and religious authority by eliminating those defined as deviating from rigidly formulated norms of belief and conduct. In short, the formation of a 'persecuting society' is directly related to a far-reaching extension of power and influence by the

bureaucratic state with its attendant cadres of literate, reform-minded clergy in the post-Gregorian age.

To buttress his thesis of an official 'persecuting society', Moore draws above all on social theories of Max Weber and Michel Foucault. Weber had observed the tendency of ruling classes to shape a 'superior community of faith' in order to promote the religious and social unity of the state. This in turn prompts the need to identify those who do not meet this standard and punish them accordingly. Moore finds a fertile insight as well in Foucault's analysis of power relationships, especially in the tendency of authorities to rely on intimidation and persecution as primary ways of controlling behavior and dissent in order to secure their hold on the levers of power.

Most persuasive are the segments on heresy. Least convincing is the treatment of the leper as a persecuted class. Although recent literature on leprosy is analyzed and summarized admirably, the sequestering of lepers from the twelfth century on cannot, on the face of it, be equated morally to the officially sanctioned oppression of heretics and Jews. Lepers, because of their contagious affliction, had long been considered a serious threat to their neighbors and had been segregated accordingly in the ancient Mediterranean societies. The term *persecution* seems in this respect to be applied too loosely and ambiguously, thereby weakening somewhat the general argument.

Nonetheless, Moore has made an excellent case for viewing persecution in the High Middle Ages from a much broader and more coherent perspective. The premise of a calculated, often co-ordinated, assault on dissent and difference by medieval 'power élites' could well be applicable to other topics. Issues of gender and ethnicity, for example, might be amenable to similar investigation in accordance with the methods of historical sociology.

In any case, the paperback edition will be welcomed by instructors looking for provocative supplementary reading for their courses.

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Poly, Jean-Pierre, and Eric Bournazel. *The Feudal Transformation, 900-1200*. Trans Caroline Higgitt. Holmes and Meier, New York 1991. 404 pp. \$42.95.

The question of the nature of feudalism has plagued each generation of historians since the term was coined during the French Revolution. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, historians believed they had found the definitive answer in the great synthesis created by Marc Bloch in his famous *Feudal Society* (1939). However, nearly twenty years ago the synthesis created by Bloch stumbled and fell before the advance of research. Although still a classic of medieval history, *Feudal Society* lost its place as the definitive text concerning feudalism. Lost, too, were many historians who, because they were not students of feudalism, had come to rely on Bloch for an understanding of feudal society and for teaching material. For a time, historians labored without the benefit of a work