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Honors Research Proposal

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Shepherds of the Supernatural in Carolingian Pastoral Literature

My research reassesses the role of the subversive, the obscure, the unknown, and unpredictable expressions of popular faith, belief, and holiness in eight- to tenth-century Francia as it elaborates and modifies Michel Foucault’s theory of the Christian Pastorate and Barbara Rosenwein’s scheme of emotional communities. Superstitious beliefs and magical encounters in Carolingian literature, as understood by contemporary historiography, formed a category of difference: a mirror of non-Christian otherness against which an image of Christian orthodoxy and correctness developed. I propose that lay practitioners did not understand such otherness as external to Christianity but rather as a continuum of counter-elements aimed to redistribute pastoral power as it relates to systems of salvation. Nor did church authorities only use accounts of demons, storm conjurers, and false relics to define acceptable religious devotion. Instead, through a close-reading of hagiographies, theological tracts, and letters, I suggest the Carolingian Church utilized the margins of belief, the mixed and confused categories of magic and religion, to further extend the surveying gaze of the Pastorate into every rural community. Several general questions guide my analysis: To what end did the peasantry utilize subversive forms of sanctity and faith? Is there a functional difference between religion and magic in the social and cultural currents of the Carolingian world? Must disbelief be antithetical to belief?

Historians of the Early Middle Ages are not ignorant of these questions. Recent scholarship, spearheaded by Michael D. Bailey, Charles West, and Mayke De Jong, turns a critical eye towards the system of religious power constructed through the expansive church reforms of the “Carolingian Renaissance.” Within this research is a historiographical tendency to separate personal and institutional expressions of faith, to discuss religion and sanctity through a Weberian model of charisma. Explicit theorization offers a worthwhile, however dangerous, boon to historical understanding. And while Weber’s charismatic authority is a useful concept, alternative models ought to receive some consideration. For this project, I propose a novel reading of the “Pastorate” – a theory of religious governmentality developed by Michel Foucault in *Security, Territory, Population* (*STP*) – through Barbara Rosenwein’s “emotional communities.”

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault traces the genealogy of modern statist institutions and practices to the systems of power articulated by early and medieval Christianity. Carolingian Europe, I argue, offers a unique period in the development of this pastoral power. Between the eighth and tenth centuries emerged a series of extensive episcopal reforms. From a combination of enforceable tithe payments and systematic efforts to bring all churches under common supervision emerged the parish, a term applied to local churches beginning the ninth-century.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is in this context of dynamic reform, of dynamic relations between the Carolingian court, church, and parish community, that I turn to Foucault. Central to the project of the Pastorate, and my research, is the mechanism of pastoral power: a Christian relation of power, knowledge, and truth organized around the totalizing and individualizing gaze – the gaze of God or his representative on Earth – which strives towards perfect transparency and illumination of the subject.[[2]](#footnote-2) Pastoral power situates the soul, the primary concern of the Pastorate, into a grid of practices: penitence, self-examination, and confession. These institutional procedures no longer constitute the soul as the subject of knowledge but an *object* to seize, to separate, to distinguish so as to leave nothing hidden before God and the Pastorate, through a reflexive relationship between the subject with itself.[[3]](#footnote-3) This Christian hermeneutics of the self, argues Foucault, is a technique of political individualization designed to produce governable identities. How do such identities, naked before God and, in theory, the Church, find expression? For this question, I turn to Rosenwein’s model of emotional communities as a tool of historical analysis.

Rosenwein argues that the norms, values, and behaviors of any period, group, or locality shape emotional expression.[[4]](#footnote-4) Emotional communities, in other words, are shared vocabularies and ways of thinking that cultivate which responses to any given event find external expression, and which remain to the self. Applying this theoretical framework to early medieval pastoral literature – that is, texts concerned with the audience’s moral wellbeing and salvation – I hypothesize that the Carolingian peasantry made conscious decisions about their engagement with supernatural forces, permissible or otherwise, as a form of resistance against the Pastorate and its gaze, which did not an achieve all-encompassing vision, as indicated by the variable emotional communities within the Empire.

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3. Michel Foucault, *“*The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 783. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)