

THE PLACE OF GOD IN PIERS PLOWMAN AND MEDIEVAL ART by
Mary Clemente Davlin OP, *Ashgate, Aldershot* 2001. Pp.viii+ 208,
£40.00 hbk.

Despite its intended openness to a wide 14th-century audience and a copious tradition of modern scholarship, *Piers Plowman* remains one of the most enigmatic pieces of English medieval poetry. After a series of studies on aspects of its linguistic, scriptural and theological peculiarities, Mary Clemente Davlin now offers a different, overarching context for reading the poem. Her new book is a search for Langland's understanding of God in relation to contemporary liturgical practices, exegesis and religious art.

In the introductory chapter, Mary Davlin describes *Piers Plowman* as the first English poem to present God as the active protagonist in the human quest for his nature. She defines 'space' and 'place' as emblems of inner realities, charged with moral implications and reflecting Langland's awareness of the human thought-process. The few realistic descriptions of places, disconnected and inconsistent, are understood as one of the numerous markers of the dramatic instability and shifting layers of *Piers Plowman's* outer form, the subject of a detailed analysis in Davlin's earlier study of Langland's word-play as an interactive game between poet, characters and readers (*A Game of Heuene* 1989).

The introductory chapter concludes with a methodological clarification about the use of visual and liturgical material to establish parallels and differences with, rather than suggest influences on, *Piers Plowman*. The author accepts Elizabeth Salter's warning that comparisons with works of art cannot explain Langland's dramatic imagery, and recognises that different arts had different methods and audiences, but hopes to demonstrate how the place of God was imagined and articulated through various media.

The second chapter is concerned with the cosmology of the poem, vertical as well as horizontal, and its relationship to God's static otherness, on the one hand, and his dynamic closeness to humankind, on the other. The paradox is explored through the symbolic meanings of the tower and the Cross as the meeting points of planimetric and multi-layered views of the world, and of God's elevated status and active involvement through the act of salvation. Chapter 3 adds a new dimension to the discussion of the place of God: Christ's body, the meeting place of divine and human nature, is examined first in the light of the incarnation and then with reference to the passion. Mary Davlin's analysis of the sacred interior of Christ's heart, the lifegiving power of his blood, the symbolism of birth, nursing, light and love reads as a summary of the major themes of medieval sacramental and mystical theology represented in *Piers Plowman*.

Clusters of metaphorical meanings, common to medieval literature, ritual and art, are convincingly woven into the complex

imagery of mutual indwelling and interpenetration between the realms of the divine and the human. This union of God and creation through divine love is further explored in Chapter 4. The mystery of the Trinity, translated by Langland into the language of common human experiences and discussed by Mary Davlin in terms of spatial interiority, demonstrates the poet's sensitivity to the 'inner sanctum' of the human mind and soul. While visual representations of God's indwelling are sparse, numerous passages of liturgical, homiletic and exegetical texts illustrate the importance of the heart as the sacred enclosure where the union between divine and human takes place. Similarly, few parallels with the visual arts are found for the place of God in the community, the main subject of Chapter 5. Yet, unlike previous chapters which overflow with liturgical and theological analogues, this one shows Langland distancing himself from contemporary theories which define the community in terms of exclusion. The belief in God's omnipresence and in Christ's kinship with all humans demands respect for the poor, salvation for sinners, and acceptance of those normally excluded from the community.

In a strong Bakhtinian tradition, Mary Davlin interprets *Piers Plowman's* multiple voices as an expression of the tension between popular opinions on Jews, Saracens, pagans, heretics, prostitutes and homosexuals, and the all-inclusive love of the Church and of God for humankind.

The sixth and final chapter summarises the book's main issues in four clusters which Mary Davlin dubs 'paradoxes' but resolves in the moderate, reconciliatory spirit of early scholasticism. They outline the avenues which, according to the author, lead to a better understanding of the poem.

First, the structure of *Piers Plowman*, both processional and centred, is compared to the plans of ecclesiastical buildings and related to God's omnipresence. Second, the author reinforces Robert Adams's conclusion that in his understanding of the conflict between God's absolute freedom and his fidelity, Langland departs from the nominalist dichotomy (*potentia absoluta/potentia ordinata*) to find the solution in the traditionally monastic belief that God always remains faithful to truth and love. The third paradox (God is always present in, but not confined to, the liturgical setting, the individual or the community) is linked to Langland's rejection of prejudice, intolerance and exclusion. The fourth paradox (God is a mystery, but also the object of intimate knowledge) is explained through *Piers Plowman's* acceptance of the traditional teaching of the Church about the possibility of obtaining knowledge of God, even if incomplete, through biblical narrative, visions, analogical language and the sacraments which re-enact the union of divine and human nature. The work concludes with an appendix of place names in *Piers Plowman*, a well-structured bibliography, an index of works of art cited and a general index.

While students and readers of medieval English literature would be familiar with most of the themes discussed in this work, there are numerous insights that open up new vistas through the thicket of *Piers Plowman* scholarship. Although the promise not to use images as mere 'illustrations' (p.26) remains just a promise, and the numerous examples of manuscript illumination and monumental painting are art-historically inert, the parallels are informative and convincing. Mary Davlin's reading of *Piers Plowman* in the light of 14th-century culture and spirituality is both highly contextualised and truly inspirational.

STELLA PANAYOTOVA

**HISTORY OF THE WORLD CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT, vol.1
EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY TO 1453** by Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *T&T Clark, Edinburgh 2001. Pp. xv + 512, £24.99 pbk.*

The publisher's ambitious claim, on the dustjacket, that the book is a 'landmark in its unique approach to the history of Christianity' appears justified. Most histories of Christianity, at least those written for the English-speaking market, reveal a Western perspective, especially in their treatment of developments after about 800. After this watershed, marked by the pope's crowning of Charlemagne as emperor of the West, Christianity in the wider world has been seen as an appendix to what happened in Europe; before it, as a preparation for these later Western developments. The present work, rather, sees Christianity as a world movement throughout its first millennium and a half — a theme that no doubt will be developed further in volume 2.

America and Australasia do not yet enter the story but North Africa and especially Asia are well treated. Sunquist's recent *Dictionary of Asian Christianity* has established him as a leading authority on Asia, so it is refreshing to see his scholarship brought to bear in reviewing christian history in an eastwards direction. We are reminded that the geographical spread of Christianity extended far further East than West of Rome, or even of Jerusalem, into Persia, Afghanistan, India and China; that for long the Syriac-speaking churches were as important as the Greek-speaking; that some knowledge of Buddhism was current in Egypt around 200, witness Clement of Alexandria (p.86). Today the lament is often heard that Christianity is too Western, yet for many centuries Europeans might well have complained that the Church was too Asian. The present work, therefore, should encourage the growing churches of Africa and Asia to recover their early roots and traditions rather than to seek only liberation from Western developments.

The book's title styles Christianity as a movement rather than a Church. This is a commonly accepted theme for the early centuries but the authors are remarkable for pursuing the notion after the conversion of Constantine and throughout the medieval period. The