Medievalists Respond to Charlottesville

In light of the recent events in the United States, most recently the racist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, the undersigned community of medievalists condemns the appropriation of any item or idea or material in the service of white supremacy. In addition, we condemn the abuse of colleagues, particularly colleagues of color, who have spoken publicly against this misuse of history.

As scholars of the medieval world we are disturbed by the use of a nostalgic but inaccurate myth of the Middle Ages by racist movements in the United States. By using imagined medieval symbols, or names drawn from medieval terminology, they create a fantasy of a pure, white Europe that bears no relationship to reality. This fantasy not only hurts people in the present, it also distorts the past. Medieval Europe was diverse religiously, culturally, and ethnically, and medieval Europe was not the entire medieval world. Scholars disagree about the motivations of the Crusades—or, indeed, whether the idea of “crusade” is a medieval one or came later—but it is clear that racial purity was not primary among them.

Contemporary white nationalists are not the first Americans to have turned nostalgic views of the medieval period to racist purposes. It is, in fact, deeply ironic that the Klan’s ideas of medieval knighthood were used to harass immigrants who practiced the forms of Christianity most directly connected with the medieval church. Institutions of scholarship must acknowledge their own participation in the creation of interpretations of the Middle Ages (and other periods) that served these narratives. Where we do find bigotry, intolerance, hate, and fear of “the other” in the past—and the Middle Ages certainly had their share—we must recognize it for what it is and read it in its context, rather than replicating it.

The medieval Christian culture of Europe is indeed a worthy object of study, in fact a necessary one. Medieval Studies must be broader than just Europe and just Christianity, however, because to limit our object of study in such a way gives an arbitrary and false picture of the past. We see a medieval world that was as varied as the modern one. It included horrific violence, some of it committed in the name of religion; it included feats of bravery, justice, harmony, and love, some of them also in the name of religion. It included movement of people, goods, and ideas over long distances and across.
geographical, linguistic, and religious boundaries. There is much to be learned from studying the period, whether we choose to focus on one community and text or on wider interactions. What we will not find is the origin of a pure and supreme white race.

Every generation of scholars creates its own interpretations of the past. Such interpretations must be judged by how well they explain the writings, art, and artifacts that have come down to us. As a field we are dedicated to scholarly inquiry. As the new semester approaches at many institutions, we invite those of you who have the opportunity to join us. Take a class or attend a public lecture on medieval history, literature, art, music. Learn about this vibrant and varied world, instead of simply being appalled by some racist caricature of it. See for yourself what lessons it holds for the modern world.

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