

## Book Review

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**BOOK REVIEWED:** SAMUEL W. COLLINS, *THE CAROLINGIAN DEBATE OVER SACRED SPACE, THE NEW MIDDLE AGES* (BASINGSTOKE: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2012), 234 PP. ISBN: 9781137002594.

Samuel W. Collins starts this revised version of his 2005 doctoral dissertation with an episode to which he devotes his entire last chapter. Here, Alcuin and Theodulf of Orléans face each other in a dispute over a cleric from Orléans who fled to Tours in search of asylum. At the end of the book, the reader discovers that at the core of the dispute stood Alcuin's and Theodulf's divergent views on the connection between the physical world and the divine. According to Theodulf, a penitent, especially one who had not been recognized as such, did not belong in a church since he corrupted its purity. Alcuin, on the other hand, contended that after his confession, the penitent had every reason to be in the church, the place where his recovery started. For the latter, the material world and its ecclesiastical topography did not stand in direct connection with the scriptural past or the eschatological future, whereas for Theodulf they did.

This divide between those who do and those who do not view earthly space and time as part of a continuous history running from the Old Testament to the second coming, and by extension, those who do or do not see earthly spaces as filled with divine meaning runs throughout Collins's book. In the introduction, he states the goal of the work: to study the (hotly) contested imagination of the meaning of sacred places in Western Europe from the late eighth to the late ninth centuries. He does this mainly through the study of texts, because the material evidence is, in his opinion, too limited.

The introduction further houses brief overviews of views on sacred places in Antiquity and early Christianity as well as of the study of place in modern historiography.

In Chapter 1, Collins discusses two insular sources that provided Carolingian authors with two divergent views on how time and place should be understood. On one side of the ‘gulf’ stood Bede’s *De tabernaculo* and *De templo*, on the other the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*. Using his own method of scriptural exegesis, Bede analysed the meaning contained in the Temple and the Tabernacle. He studied them as buildings known to us through words, in themselves containing meaning, rather than reading meaning in the words of scripture describing them. He refused, however, to apply this method to churches in his own time since he held, with Augustine, that the present did not reveal divine meaning. It was cut off from the link between the scriptural past and the end of time. Collins’s second important point with regard to Bede is his view of the Temple as a model of the design of heaven, which in turn was a model of Christian redemption. A crucial element of the design of the Temple in this regard were the three concentric courtyards that restricted access for certain groups, mirroring the different categories of Christian souls in heaven. The compilers of the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, who were more concerned with the churches in this world, also defined holy places by the existence of a core that was holiest of all and accessible only to the most pure or virtuous, surrounded by a number of concentric rings. Unlike Bede, and following in the tradition of Isidore instead of Augustine, the compilers of the *Hibernensis* view the contemporary world and its churches as part of a continuous timeline running from the scriptural past to the second coming. For them, it is therefore perfectly acceptable to view holy places in the present as equally meaningful and functioning in the same way as those in the Old Testament and in heaven.

In the second chapter, these opposite views of time and place continue to play an important part. The subject of the chapter is Amalarius of Metz’s exegesis of the contemporary liturgy. For Amalarius, the liturgy and its setting, words and gestures were as sacred and meaningful as scripture. Despite the importance of Bede with regard to his exegetical method and his analysis of the temple and the tabernacle, Amalarius did not, obviously, see the same distinction between the sacred past and the worldly present. In this sense, he stood in the tradition of Isidore and the authors of the *Hibernensis*. For Amalarius, past, present and future came together at the altar. Amalarius’s views were vehemently attacked by Agobard (of Lyon) and his deacon Florus, partly for political reasons. Their main criticism of Amalarius was his failure to recognise the boundary between the scriptural and the extrascriptural, between the word of God and the compositions of men. Amalarius was condemned in 838. However, his views became more popular than those of his opponents. In this second chapter, it becomes clear that Collins’s focus on space is difficult to maintain: in fact, he is at least equally concerned with views of time and history.

Chapter 3 focuses on three ‘texts’ written in the context of the Carolingian monastic reform movement. They are preceded by Collins’s view on the Carolingian ‘monastic project’ that was ‘newly grounded in an architectural setting’ (p. 70). Here, I believe Collins gives a somewhat

distorted view of things. Many monasteries may have been built or renovated in the Carolingian period, but this was as much a consequence of the growth of communities and the sudden availability of means as a conscious, empire-wide strategy, especially not one due to the direct influence of the emperors. The three texts under discussion are the Plan of St. Gall and Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel and Hildemar of Corbie's commentaries on the Rule of Benedict. This chapter, which lacks a conclusion, is not the most coherent, but what the three sources have in common is their discussion of the role of the physical spaces of the monastery in ordering and explaining the monastic life. Again, we encounter the idea of the gradual accessibility of the holiest spaces, as well as the topics of purity and pollution.

The fourth and last chapter deals, as mentioned before, with the dispute over the asylum seeker in Tours. Here, the impact of the theoretical debates studied in the foregoing on everyday life is shown. At the base of the debate is not the validity of the right of sanctuary, but the question if holy places could be corrupted by the presence of (grave) sinners. In other words: was impurity infectious or not? Alcuin's and Theodulf's divergent answers to this question have already been given above.

The book is well written – typographical errors however, suggesting an editor who does not understand Latin – and addresses questions that were in need of study. In general, Collins's choice of examples is excellent and his introductions to the texts and their authors concise, which allows him to keep his chapters compact. Thanks to his succinct explanations of matters such as the Carolingian liturgical reforms or views on penance, the book is accessible to non-specialists as well.

An important difference between the book and Collins's dissertation, apart from the addition of a new conclusion, is his occasional replacement of 'architecture' with 'place'. As he rightly acknowledges in the introduction (pp. 3, 12), ninth-century writers scarcely commented on the built environment surrounding them. They did, however, write about buildings or places in the scriptural past or in the eschatological future. Yet, Collins holds that when they did talk about architecture and its meaning, 'they did so nearly free of reference to actual construction in stone' (p. 12). Although this may be true, it would have been good if Collins had reflected more on this topic. The tension between theory and practice remains something of a sore spot throughout Collins's book, especially when, in its conclusion, he does discuss actual architecture in an attempt to show the reflection of the debate in these structures. Here, more than before, the absence of images is unfortunate.