

New Perspectives
on the Sacred
and the Secular
in Old French
and Old Provençal
Poetry

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By

Cyril Aslanov

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This book is dedicated to my father, Serge Aslanoff, a truly medieval man, and to the memory of the great medievalist Lawrence Besserman who gave me the idea of writing this book.

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PREFACE

The idea of dedicating a monograph to the coexistence, convergence, and opposition of *sacred* and *secular* in medieval France and Occitania crystallized in May 2000. During that time, my senior colleague and mentor Lawrence Besserman, from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, planned a seminar on “the sacred and the secular,” which lasted two years. It brought researchers and research students together for a stimulating reflection on these issues, considered from a wide range of perspectives. Scholars from various fields—including Jewish thought, sociology of religion, anthropology, ethnology, history, medieval English literature, and medieval French literature—brought enlightening insights on the status of sacredness in various civilizations. Presentations given by students from the humanities and social sciences also helped evaluate the specificity of the dialectic of sacred and secular in the context of medieval England and France.

Another important landmark in the project's crystallization was an international conference—“Sacred and Secular in Medieval and Early Modern Culture” (June 2001)—organized by Lawrence Besserman in Jerusalem. During the conference, the project received constructive criticism from colleagues, allowing us to focus our reflection and sketch out our common research interests in the conference proceedings.¹

It should also be mentioned that this study on the interplay between sacred and secular in the medieval West was conducted in a city deeply affected by manifold clashes between antagonistic religions—as well as between various trends within each religious group. These tensions were illustrated by the events of September 28, 2000, when Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount and triggered the beginning of the Second Intifada. It is not fortuitous that this second wave of violence between Israelis and Palestinians was precisely named *Intifāḍat al-ʿAqṣā*—the “al-Aqsa Intifada”—with a significant use of the name of the mosque in front of which the scandal broke out.² Intra-religious conflicts have also found opportunities

¹ The conference proceedings were edited by Besserman and published as *Sacred and Secular in Medieval and Early Modern Cultures: New Essays*.

² For an analysis of the intricacy of secular nationalism and religious nationalism in the events of September 2000, see Neuman, “Religious Nationalism, Violence and the Israeli State,” pp. 99-100.

to express themselves in Jerusalem. The Crimean War was triggered by the 1852 conflict of prerogative between Latin monks and Greek-Orthodox prelates in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. During this incident, France backed the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Franciscans, while Russia supported the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch. The coupling of religion and politics led to an ecclesiastic clash, degenerating to such a degree that it offered Napoleon III and Czar Nicholas I a pretext to embark on a murderous two-year conflict that also dragged in Britain and the Ottoman Empire.³

Today's intense debates between Ultra-Orthodox Jews and secular Israelis are a serious issue in the Israeli society. Periodically, the conflict is renewed under various pretexts: archeological excavations that allegedly endanger Biblical burial sites; opening municipal parking lots and cinemas on the Sabbath; the High Court of Justice intervening in the internal affairs of Ultra-Orthodox Communities to avoid radical discrimination or sexism; draft bills promoting the recruitment of Ultra-Orthodox youth to the army. Repeated uproar and violence from the religious community has led many young people to leave Jerusalem and settle in the predominantly secular city of Tel Aviv or elsewhere in Israel—far away from what is often perceived as Jerusalem's unbearable atmosphere. This demographic exodus is only offset by the arrival of more Ultra-Orthodox Jews, transforming formerly secular neighborhoods into strictly religious ones.

These tensions between two opposite poles of Israeli society are an open wound—in the country in general and in Jerusalem in particular. The old demons rise repeatedly, as during the gay pride parades held in Jerusalem on June 30, 2005 and on July 30, 2015. During these event, which received authorization from both the municipality and the police, a religious extremist stabbed three homosexuals (2005) and killed a fifteen-year girl. Even more symptomatic were the banners wielded by religious people demonstrating against the parade. They protested the desecration of what they called the “most holy place in the world by the abomination of modern civilization.” Whether these incidents are soon forgotten, or alternately reflect deeper trends in Israeli society, they illustrate the conflict between the spheres of sacredness and secularism.

Paradoxically, this endemic conflict between religious tradition and secular modernity was quite beneficial for the present study. It helped in concretely understanding what was at stake in the infringements of the sacred sphere on the secular—whether in eleventh-century France or twenty-

³ Setton-Watson, “The Origins of the Crimean War,” pp. 25-7; Goldfrank, *The Origins of the Crimean War*, pp. 75-90; Wasserstein, *Divided Jerusalem: The Struggle for the Holy City*, pp. 40-3.

first-century Jerusalem. Although every historical situation is unique, experiencing the clash between religion and secularism allowed for the projection of a retrospective gaze on analogous conflicts that divided the Christian West throughout the Middle Ages.

More than any place in Israel, Jerusalem exemplifies the importance of religious factors in the shaping of civilization. The heights of Mount Scopus, where the Hebrew University campus is located, offer a direct view of the Temple Mount, a site saturated with holiness, serving as a place of worship for three monotheistic religions. It was first the Israelite Temple, then *al-ḥaram al-sharīf*, and later the Christian Temple Church from which the Templars drew their name. And, again it functioned and still functions as a place of Muslim worship since the conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187. The Temple Mount's three successive roles reveal the permanence of a kind of transconfessional topography of sanctity—no matter which of the three monotheistic religions was in possession of this holy place. From a synchronic viewpoint, the entire landscape around the Temple Mount is literally invaded by buildings belonging to competing religious faiths.

Neither was the western medieval dimension completely absent from my everyday horizon while writing this book. Besides the authentic vestiges of Western medieval sacred art and architecture—such as the Crusader Church of the Resurrection in Abu Ghosh—the city of Jerusalem boasts many structures that replicate medieval Western European architecture. These include the pseudo-Florentine Italian Hospital, where the Ministry of Education is now located; the Dormition Abbey, the central tower of which imitates the main tower of Worms Cathedral; and St. George's Cathedral, built according to Anglo-Norman Gothic patterns. Although esthetically disputable, these modern attempts to bestow a medieval touch on the topography of Jerusalem functioned as a kind of stimulus for the imagination—or perhaps as a warning against the risk of adopting a stereotypical perception of the Middle Ages.

The spatial dimension is not the only one to be impregnated by the omnipresence of sacredness in Jerusalem. Time is also deeply permeated by it. The siren marking the entrance of Sabbath, the blowing of the shofar during the month of Elul and the High Holidays, the sounds of church bells, the calls of the muezzin, and the cannon blow on the month of Ramadan—all these signs express the specific rhythms of each religion present in the city of Jerusalem.⁴

⁴ About the difficulty of settling inter-religious conflicts in modern Jerusalem, see Sharkansky, *Governing Jerusalem: Again on the World's Agenda*, pp. 165-70.

The amazing plurality of religious cultures is also perceptible in Jerusalem's semiotic landscape, exemplified by the picturesque world of taxis. Whereas many Jewish taxi drivers put up portraits of the miraculous rabbi Israel Abeḥsera (Baba Sale) or the renowned Kabbalist Itzḥaq Kaduri, their Muslim colleagues adorn their cars with Fatima's hands, Islamic beads, or Koranic quotations while their Arab Christian competitors pin little icons of St. George on their dashboard to protect themselves against the dangers of traffic.

Admittedly, Jerusalem's religious variety—and its diffusion into the city's spatial, temporal, and semiotic landscapes—did not add anything to what I knew about the dialectic of sacred and secular in the medieval West. But it somehow bridged the gap between the strict rigor of dry scholarship and witnessing the vivid and sometimes dramatic processes unfolding not very far from my desk at the Hebrew University.

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INTRODUCTION*

I. Sacred vs. Secular: An Anachronistic Opposition?

This essay explores the question of coexistence, convergence, and opposition between *sacred* and *secular* in Old French and Old Provençal poetry from the Middle Ages—specifically from the ninth to the thirteenth century. It is important to stress from the outset that the use of those categories of *sacred* and *secular* is a provisional one. Indeed, it is highly probable that during the period taken in consideration, the meaning of those terms was quite different from the one we are used to assign to them.

I have chosen to combine my studies of these two literatures for several reasons. Throughout the Middle Ages, France and Occitania were united by both proximity and symmetry. This was despite the fundamental difference between the cloudy horizon of the places north of the Loire and the sunny atmosphere of the Occitan Mediterranean shores, between the heavily Germanized culture of Northern France and the more Latin civilization of Occitania. Still, both the French and the Provençal tongues pertain to the Gallo-Romance subdivision of Romance languages. Moreover, the Plantagenet domination over Poitou and Aquitaine—the cradle of Provençal lyrical poetry, the first two generations of troubadours being all of Aquitanian origin—allowed a *translatio studii* from Provençal-speaking areas to continental Normandy and Anglo-Norman Britain, which were as much a part of the French-speaking areas as Capetian France itself. This transfer of knowledge and tastes partly bypassed the mediation of Capetian-controlled provinces in Central-Northern France. Interestingly enough, the great-grandson of the first troubadour, William IX, Duke of Aquitaine, was Richard the Lionheart. This half-Occitan sovereign who is credited with the composition of a song in Provençal, boasts a strong presence in the corpus of troubadour poetry, and is mentioned repeatedly in the songs of the celebrated troubadour Bertran de Born.¹ His death was even lamented in Gaucelm Faidit's famous *planh*.² A special link between the litterati of Occitania and

* The writing of this Introduction was carried out thanks to the support of the Russian Science Foundation (project no. 15-18-00062, St. Petersburg State University).

¹ Riquer, *Los trovadores*, pp. 718–21; 727–30; 734–42; 751–4.

² Mouzat, ed., *Les poèmes de Gaucelm Faidit*, pp. 415–24.

the French-speaking elite of the Plantagenet kingdom is also suggested by a mention of Richard the Lionheart in the biography of the prominent troubadour Bernart de Ventadorn, who according to a half-legendary tradition found shelter in the court of his compatriot Eleanor of Aquitania in Anglo-Norman Britain.³ A text like Thomas' *Tristan* is perhaps the best illustration of the way Anglo-Norman literature was enriched by Provençal courtly aesthetics. This can be seen by comparing Thomas' *Tristan* to Bérout's *Tristan*, which was written in continental Normandy, far from the atmosphere that characterized the court of Henry II, and lacks the refinements of courtly sophistry so integral to the plot of Thomas' *Tristan*.

Interestingly enough, the formative stage of early medieval literature chronologically coincided with the disintegration of secular clergy and the concomitant revival of monasticism and religious fervor in the ninth and tenth century, which culminated with the foundation of Cluny in 909.⁴ When André Vauchez calls "secularization" this process of disintegration, he refers to the convergence of clerical life with the lifestyle of laypeople, and not to the crystallization of a fully-fledged secular sphere in the West's cultural landscape. Secularization in this second sense seems to have only started to form at the beginning of the thirteenth century. However, as we shall see, it is not absolutely certain that the secular sphere emerging toward the end of Central Middle Ages and the beginning of Late Middle Ages should be understood in relation to the concept of sacredness as we understand it today. Moreover, the very concept of sacredness has undergone a deep change since the post-modern (or post-secular) reconsideration of the opposition between sacred and secular in Western societies. After the path-breaking work of Charles Taylor—who suggested that religion in general, and rival religions in particular, are now considered as an option among others in the cultural horizon of the West—the binary opposition between secularity and sacredness has been considerably challenged.⁵

Talal Asad has also relativized the boundaries between sacred and secular in a comparative view of secularism and secularization in the Christian West and Muslim East, which includes an analysis of the encounter between secular West and Islam. Asad actually considers secularism and religion to mutually contain each other. In a religious age, secularism is part of theological discourse, whereas in a secular age, the same category claims to be the ground "from which theological discourse

³ See Boutière-Schutz-Cluzel, *Biographies des troubadours*, pp. 26–8.

⁴ Vauchez, *La spiritualité du moyen âge occidental*, p. 33. On the foundation of Cluny as the affirmation of the autonomy of monasticism toward the feudal and royal authorities, see Cowdrey, *The Cluniacs and the Gregorian Reform*, pp. 3-63.

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

was generated.”⁶

Early stages in the development of Old French and Old Provençal literatures offer a rare opportunity to consider the manifestations of sacredness on a textual level, alongside the blurring of the opposition between sacred and secular. At this stage, it might be helpful to define the exact nature of the concept of sacredness in the medieval West. Rather than using the general definition of this term according to modern sociology and anthropology (as in Émile Durkheim’s or Mircea Eliade’s analyses for instance), it may be more prudent to use a criterion that was valid in the cultural landscape of medieval Europe, and propose an equivalence between the ecclesiastical and the sacred dimensions. However, this ecclesiastical dimension was complex and involved various modalities: the spiritual and temporal power of the Church; the influence it exerted on the political sphere; the difference between elitist and popular cultures that were both exposed to non-Christian influences: the first inasmuch as it received the legacy of Latin culture with all its Pagan mythologemes, and the second because the Christianization of the countryside was a very long process that was never totally completed, as shown by the survival of pre-Christian practices and legends probably inherited from a popular Gallo-Roman legacy that was actually mainly Celtic in its content.

This project is based on the implicit suggestion that the religious horizon of a given period can be considered a kind of cultural text, with the notion of “text” understood in a wider sense than the strictly linguistic one. Within the cultural text of a religion, dogma and ritual constitute a structure that functions with the same degree of systematicity as a grammar. In addition to the structural analogy between religious systems and linguistic structures, one can also find other bridges between grammar and cult, or between linguistics and comparative religion. Thus, one of the triggers for the development of grammatical traditions was precisely the need to preserve the purity of the sacred language considered a vector of communication between the worshipers and their God or gods. In some cases, religious justifications explain the flourishing of Indian grammatical tradition since the fifth century BC, the blossoming of Arabic grammar in the eighth century, and the emendation of Latin manuscripts by Alcuin during the Carolingian Renaissance.

The thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla (1248–ca1323) provides another example of the intrinsic correspondence between religion and grammar, as he attempted to find a metaphysical explanation for consonant and vowel signs in the Hebrew language in the

⁶ Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, p. 192.

second and third part of his *Sefer Ginnat Egoz* and in *Sefer ha-Niqqud*.

In addition, similar categories are operational in linguistics and comparative religion studies, suggesting another parallel between the field of sacredness and its linguistic horizon. In both fields, one is accustomed to dealing with substrates, syncretism, deep and superficial structure, and social stratification. This common terminological platform is perhaps more than a matter of fortuitous homonymy. It may imply a community of concepts and a structural analogy between both disciplines.

Modeling literature and religion sciences in spatial terms can also help bridge the gap between the intra-linguistic category of literature and the semiotic dimension of religion. The term “literary field” or “literary domain” is particularly characteristic of the tendency to project the study of literature onto a spatial level. As to the study of religion, the phrase “sacred sphere,” which I shall use throughout the present study, was influenced by Yuri Lotman’s category of semiosphere—the system of signs of a specific civilization in a given time and place. Using a spatial metaphor to represent both literature and sacredness provides a common denominator for literary and religious studies, between the text of the books and the systems of dogmas and beliefs contained by humankind’s various religions.

The development of poetry written in vernacular in France and Occitania is concomitant with the process by which the Church seized control of the various sectors of early medieval society. The era that witnessed those parallel dynamics—the expansion of the influence exerted by Western Christianity and the development of a literature written in the vernacular languages—was actually a new beginning after the collapse of the Carolingian order during the ninth century. The literary reflection of the Carolingian civilization consisted almost exclusively of learned Latin texts and some pioneering attempts to write in Old German, such as the Old Saxon *Heliand*, composed shortly before 830 or the *Hildebrandslied* also composed during the ninth century. This state of affairs was challenged by the second wave of Barbarian invasions and the emergence of feudalism. However, the Carolingian world’s disintegration was only an interim stage in a process that led to the Church’s control of almost each and every inch of the West’s cultural space. In a certain sense, the chaos that ensued after the aggression of the new Barbarians—which included the Scandinavians, the Magyars, and the Saracens—against the Carolingian West also triggered the development of a literature written in the vernacular languages: the cultural decay that accompanied learned civilization’s dismantling was propitious for a popularization process consisting in committing spoken language to written word. The death of

the Carolingian civilization was like a stage allowing a new civilization to blossom. The power of the Church colonized the vacuum left by the destruction of the imperial infrastructures and elitist culture had to downgrade itself to the level of the ignoramuses.

Another more recent explanation for the blossoming of a literature in vernacular stresses the continuity between Carolingian and post-Carolingian civilization. According to Barbara Frank-Job, the Carolingian reform had the paradoxical result of making the Latin used at Mass even more difficult for the illiterate to understand. In order to make the cult more performative, some clerics decided to compose vernacular hymns like the *Sequence of St. Eulalia* and other paraliturgical texts stretching from the end of the ninth century to the early eleventh century.⁷ Regardless of whether such popularization is part of the Carolingian order, or the consequence of post-Carolingian disorder, it remains beyond doubt that by the time the turmoil ended in the late tenth century, Christianity began another endeavor to gain new territories or recuperate those that had been lost. The first stage of this process was the Peace of God movement, started in Occitania after 950. It attempted to sanctify space in order to prevent bloodshed in the churches and monasteries and impose order on the prevailing feudal anarchy.⁸ This movement had immediate political repercussions and the same years witnessed two major events that helped guarantee stability in Continental Europe: the proclamation of the Holy Roman Empire by Otto I in 962 and the rise of the Capetian dynasty after Hugh Capet was chosen as king of France in 987.

The Truce of God movement ushered in the second stage of a process through which the Church continued to seize control over the medieval West's political structures and intellectual horizon. Launched in Catalonia around 1027, it prohibited bloodshed on Sunday as during the periods of Advent and Lent.⁹ Although it was rarely respected, this clause expressed the Church's attempt to Christianize time, not only on the global level through the history of Salvation, but also on the level of everyday temporality and individual life.

The third stage in the West's Christianization process was the affirmation of Papacy against the Emperors after the papal reform of 1046-73.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, this important turning point resulted in a conflict

⁷ Frank-Job, "Les traditions des textes paraliturgiques et le passage à l'écrit du vernaculaire", pp. 39-44.

⁸ Head and Landes (eds.), *The Peace of God*.

⁹ Barthélémy, *L'an mil et la paix de Dieu*, pp. 501-4.

¹⁰ On this reform and its consequences, see Morris, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050 to 1250*, pp. 79-133; Tellenbach, *The Church in*

between Church and Empire, which was by no means a clash between secularism and clericalism. Emperors claimed to belong to a certain kind of sanctity by appending the appellation “Holy” to the official designation of Empire. By aiming at holiness, the Holy Roman Empire sought to encroach upon the prerogatives of the Pope. Conversely, the spiritual authority of the Church strove to infringe upon the temporal power of the Empire in an attempt to Christianize the sphere of politics. Either way, Pope Gregory VII's victory over his rival Henry IV settled for a while the rivalry between spiritual and temporal powers. The politicization of the Church—or, alternatively, the sanctification of politics—also suggests that Augustine's theocratic ideal of the “City of God” was taken seriously by the rulers of Western Christianity.

Western Christianity's sense of monolithic cohesion was further reinforced by the schism of 1054, when the Greek Orthodox Church was separated from the Roman Catholic Church. It also bestowed legitimacy upon the Western Church as such. Before the schism, the Eastern Orthodox Church was endowed with a certain prestige, being perceived as the cradle of Christianity. After the schism, however, the Catholic West started to be conscious of itself as the only true option in the path to Salvation. Indeed, in the *Song of Roland*—a text based on oral traditions and composed approximately toward the end of the eleventh century—the Greeks are included in a federation of pagan nations led by the Saracen king Baligant.¹¹ This polarization greatly contributed to the growing hostility that Westerners felt against the Byzantines despite, or because of, the first three Crusades—which were led against a common Muslim enemy. Beyond the alleged fighting against the Seljuks, there were strong disagreements between the Basileus and the crusaders, whom the Byzantines often perceived as reckless adventurers in search of booty.

The fourth stage in Western society's Christianization process coincided with the First Crusade which began to be preached in 1095. Instead of prohibiting warfare, as the Peace of God and Truce of God movements did, the preachers of holy war put military violence in the service of a large-scale counter-offensive of Christianity against Islam.

By then, all the conditions were ripe for a clerical domination over the Occident's entire cultural landscape. The period between the tenth and twelfth century was extremely important in the West's sanctification process, and it appears that the attempt to develop a vernacular alternative

Western Europe from the Tenth to the Early Twelfth Century, pp. 141-252.

¹¹ *Chanson de Roland*, v. 3204-61 (ed. Segre), especially 3205 and 3220 that mention places belonging to the Byzantine space, like Lycia in Asia Minor or Buthrotum in Epirus.

to Latin literacy was part of this expansionist drift—with the sacred sphere seizing control over every aspect of everyday existence. Linguistic horizons and literary spaces reflect the mental categories of each given epoch, and thanks to the analysis of the text as space, textual data may help reconstruct the dynamics that were at work in the vanished world of the Middle Ages.

Considered from a sociolinguistic perspective, the use of vernacular tongues in the frame of the cult clearly appears as an attempt by the clerics to reach a broader public. This is shown by the Council of Tours 813 decision allowing the predication to be delivered in *rustica romana lingua*, or “rural Romance.” Characteristically, one of the first instances of Old French is the tenth-century *Sermon on Jonas*, a text illustrating how the Council of Tours directives were put into practice by French clerics.¹² The Latin of the Biblical verses is mixed with Old French paraphrases that, in turn, contain whole Latin phrasings. This early attempt to set spoken language down in writing mediates between the written word and the amorphous vernacular of spoken performance. It is highly significant that higher and lower strata of medieval diglossia coexist within the page of a text that belongs to the sacred sphere.

Indeed, despite the natural association of Latin with ecclesiastic lore, breaking Latin’s monopoly on the field of literature by no means consists in an attempt to keep away from the sacred sphere. The dichotomy between Latin and vernacular languages did not necessarily correspond to an alleged demarcation between sacred and secular. Throughout the Middle Ages, and even in the Late Middle Ages, literature written in vernacular often included religious content—as shown, for instance, by the emergence of a feminine theology written in the Flemish vernacular in thirteenth-century Flanders.¹³

Moreover, the first known attempts at promoting a blaspheming literature are not to be found in vernacular, but in medieval Latin poetry—namely in the songs of the Goliards.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, the Goliards proudly stressed their belonging to the category of the *litterati* (learned) and *clerici* (clerics), as opposed to the *illiterati* (illiterates), *idiotae* (non-specialists), and *rustici* (country people).

The illiterates for whom a literature in vernacular was produced were probably far more religious than the clerics to whom we owe these blaspheming Latin poems. Besides, as we shall see below, it is not certain that blasphemy constitutes a real alternative to sacredness.

¹² Bartsch, *Chrestomathie de l’ancien français* (VIII^e–XV^e siècles), pp. 4-6.

¹³ Wiberg Pedersen, “Can God Speak in the Vernacular?”

¹⁴ Muñoz García, “El Goliardo, un letrado nada idiota,” p. 303.

The communication channel between texts written in the Latin cultural superstrate and alternative but nonetheless sacred literature composed in the vernacular languages was never broken. Indeed, the earliest literary illustrations of any Romance language relied heavily on Latin patterns. Early attempts to produce a vernacular literature were strongly impacted by Latin models, which appeared on a textual level through the massive intrusion of Latin or Latinized formulas. Since Latin was the language of cult and of religious culture, it was endowed with an aura of sanctity. Thus, the injection of a Latin phraseology into the raw material of vernacular is a blatant counterpart of the endeavor consisting in using everyday language in discussing the sublime.

With the notable exception of the *Sermon on Jonas*, which may be considered the written draft of an oral performance, most literary works produced in vernacular before the twelfth century were written in verse. Another exception is the *Chronicle of the Pseudo-Turpin*, a prosaic account translated from Latin into Old French at the beginning of the thirteenth century.¹⁵ The twelfth-century translations of the Bible into Old French might also be considered in this connection. However, the earliest attempts to produce vernacular versions of Biblical texts consist of translations of Psalms—especially the twelfth-century Psalters of Montebourg and Cambridge.¹⁶ For many, Psalms represent the summit of sacred poetry, and these sacred poems in vernacular might even include a hint of liturgical or paraliturgical interpretation. Thus, the early Old French generic system displays a striking asymmetry inasmuch as there was almost no prose counterpart to poetry written in vernacular:

	Latin	Old French
Verse	Christian hymnography	Versified hagiographies Epic
Prose	Hagiographies in prose Chronicles in prose	Bible translations into Old French (not until the twelfth century)

The scarcity of prose material written in vernacular may justify my focusing on the poetic genres, either narrative or lyric, in an attempt to define both the status of sacredness in medieval literature and the position of literature within the sacred sphere.

Even Old French epic, which has often been considered Romanized Germanic narrative, still belongs to the sphere of sacred literature—

¹⁵ Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, pp. 55-98.

¹⁶ Berger, *La Bible française au moyen âge*, pp. 1-34.

notwithstanding the common opinion that the *Song of Roland* and other epics are secular alternatives to hagiographic accounts. Interpretations of the *chansons de geste* have been influenced by a Romantic-centered focus on nationalistic aspects of what is generally acknowledged to be the early pillars of French literature. An exaggerated emphasis on these epics' chauvinistic dimension has had the effect of understating the cardinal importance of sacredness in the corpus of Old French epic. Admittedly, these narrative poems are not liturgical or paraliturgical songs like the *Sequence of St. Eulalia* or the *Song of St. Fides*. However, the fact that they do not fit the characteristics of Christian hymnography does not necessarily mean they are excluded from the category of sacredness, particularly concerning the status of the epic in the medieval generic system. Moreover, on a more technical level, there are many prosodic and musical analogies between Old French epic and Latin hymnography. I shall deal with these later in my discussion.

One of the purposes of this study is to establish a clear distinction between the intra-textual category of the sacred genre and the concept of the sacred sphere, which belongs to the cultural landscape, i.e., to the whole semiosphere of a given civilization. Whereas a sacred genre was supposed to answer specific needs in cult or liturgy, the sacred sphere cannot be restricted to a merely functional aspect. The fact that a given text elaborates on sacred subjects is sufficient to make us consider that it was part and parcel of the sacred sphere. Indeed, the intra-textual level reflects a whole *Zeitgeist*, in this case the Christian worldview that exerted such an impact throughout the history of the medieval West. Thus, almost none of the poems studied in the framework of the present essay really transcends the horizon of Christian civilization. Even when dealing with such foreign elements as Muslim enemies, pagan heroes, or monstrous supernatural beings, this literature still uses Christian categories. The attempt to view the production of medieval French and Provençal poetry as wholly permeated by a sacred context should not be confounded with the approach that consists in reading every medieval artifact as a religious allegory. William Matthews has derided this excessive trend.¹⁷ However, I would not go so far as Matthews who titled his book *Medieval Secular Literature*. There may be a middle ground between the obsession for religious allegories and the assumption that before the thirteenth century, a fully-fledged secular literature developed independently of the omnipresent sacred sphere. We have to check whether the shift from feudal epic to courtly romance, which took place in the middle of the twelfth century in Old French literature, was indicative of a turn toward the sacred sphere.

¹⁷ Matthews, "Inherited Impediments in Medieval Literary History," pp. 1-24.

The evolution of literary skills and tastes leading to the emergence of a new literary genre involves pragmatic-ontological dimensions, including the status of the reality described, along with ideological-religious implications, such as the massive insertion of pagan motifs. The emergence of this new genre did not, however, question the perpetuation of the old-style epic. Sometimes the two genres even intermingled, so that some thirteenth century epics are hardly distinguishable from romances.¹⁸

The *Romance of Eneas* is a good case study in evaluating how the literature of the Christian West coped with foreign elements. Indeed, this medieval rewriting of the *Aeneid* appears to be the most systematic attempt to rewrite a Latin epic inherited from Pagan Antiquity while keeping in line with the freshly crystallized standards of vernacular literature. It seems that the crossing of the boundaries separating Latin from vernacular language was an occasion to cut off Virgil's narrative material from its pagan background. The borrowing of those pagan elements and their integration within the Christian-dominated cultural landscape of the twelfth century illustrates a dynamic process of unilateral appropriation and recuperation, rather than processes of transculturation and secularization. Far from creating a profane sphere, the civilization of Twelfth-century Renaissance managed, as it were, to baptize the classical legacy, striving toward a comprehensive integration of every possible element in a Christian-based representational world.

It is impossible to study medieval poetry without taking Arthurian romances into account. The relationship between the sacred sphere and elements foreign to Christianity is especially puzzling in the works of Chrétien de Troyes. This riddle remains partly unresolved despite numerous studies aiming to determine whether Arthurian romances included the superficial Christianizing of motifs inherited from a Celtic background, or whether they were a genuine attempt to set Christian themes against the exotic background of ancient Britain. Either way, from a synchronic perspective, the integration of Celtic mythologemes into the world of Arthurian romances can only be viewed as Christian, no matter what their status in the primitive context of Celtic mythology had been.

It is also worth noting that the genres of hagiography and romances exerted mutual influence on each other, borrowing motifs from each other. This interplay between an undoubtedly sacred genre and a genre usually considered secular allows us to criticize the relevance of the category of "secular" literature in the twelfth century.¹⁹

¹⁸ Kay, *The Chansons de geste in the Age of Romance*.

¹⁹ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century*, pp. 72-108.

Thus, in Chapters 2 and 3, I will reconsider the legitimacy of the concept of secular literature until at least the thirteenth century, since a literature cannot be considered secular in a world increasingly dominated by the overall control of the Church. I will argue that a shift to genres and themes connected to a lesser extent with hagiography did not really provoke the crystallization of a special sphere which was fully independent of sacredness. Nor did contact with non-Christian cultures allow for a neutral space separated from religion. It seems, therefore, that the celebrated Twelfth-century Renaissance was by no means similar to that of the sixteenth century. Whereas the latter strove to shift from a theocentric worldview to an anthropocentric one, the former still relied on a strong religious foundation. From this perspective, the cultural renewal that characterized the twelfth century resembled the Carolingian renaissance: it promoted bestowing all dimensions of culture, both on a literary and semiotic level, with a religious orientation.

The two earlier Renaissances—those of the eighth-ninth centuries and that of the twelfth century—were both deeply influenced by important monastic reforms. The Carolingian era witnessed the renewal of Benedictine monasticism undertaken by St. Benedict of Aniane. As to the Twelfth-century Renaissance, it was associated with the appearance of religious orders that strove to revive the ideal of retreat in the wilderness. These included the Carthusian order founded by St. Bruno in 1084 between the demographic boom of the eleventh century and the renewal of culture in the twelfth century; the Cistercian reform that started at the beginning of the twelfth century; and the Premonstratensian order created in 1115 by St. Norbert. The impact of the Cistercian order, especially, on the whole culture of the twelfth century can hardly be overestimated. More generally, the proliferation of monastic orders is emblematic of a strong tie uniting the revival of spiritual life with the rebirth of culture.

Admittedly, the Sixteenth-century Renaissance was also marked by the creation of a new religious order: The Society of Jesus, founded in 1539-40, a few years before the Council of Trent (1545-63). However, the Early Modern Era corresponds to the beginning of the secularization of sacredness—a process diametrically opposed to the dynamics of sanctifying the mundane that took place during the Early and Central Middle Ages. Unlike previous reforms, which were instrumental in the seizing of control over spaces completely alien to Christianity, both the Jesuit and the Tridentine spirit mostly aimed to regain the space conquered by the Reformation. The fact that, at a later stage of their history, the Jesuits found new fields for their proselytizing activities in the New World in the Far East—or even in eastern Christianity like Ukraine and Syria—partly

compensated their failure to fulfill the initial project of fighting Protestantism in Western Europe. This reorientation should not, however, conceal that at the beginning of its existence, the Society of Jesus was a kind of secret police with a purpose not so different from that of the Dominican order in its activism against Catharism. A symptom of the comprehensive character of twelfth-century religious culture is its growing intolerance toward alternative religious trends—like the Cathars, first excommunicated in 1119, or the Waldensians, excommunicated in 1181—or toward believers of other religions, including Jews or Muslims.

In the cultural context of the medieval West, so deeply pervaded by the sacred sphere, no literary genre could really be considered secular. Even the corpuses of erotic poetry written in Provençal and Old French were still part and parcel of the sacred sphere. Indeed, the very invention of *fin'amors* seems to reflect an attempt to integrate aspects of aristocratic life into the sacred sphere—especially those that escaped Church control by definition, namely adulterous or extramarital love.

I would like to repeat the assumption that before the turning point of the thirteenth century, the sacred sphere was tightly bound with apparently non-sacred elements within medieval literature and culture. I believe it is legitimate to question how relevant the category of “secular” is to the study of medieval poetry because the term “secular” was never used by medieval people when they discussed their own literary production. Poetry was split into various binary oppositions throughout the cultural landscapes of many Western European countries—including France and Occitania. These dichotomies included Latin vs. Romance literature, erotic songs (*cansons*) vs. polemic ones (*sirventes*), plain vs. hermetic lyric (i.e., *trobar plan* vs. *trobar clus*), simple vs. rich rhymes (*trobar plan* vs. *trobar ric*). The range of these antitheses, however, does not correspond with any structuring partition between sacred and secular literature. Since the world of the troubadours had no specific term to designate the allegedly secular blend of lyric poetry, it is difficult to agree with the assumption that the Provençal *cansons* and *sirventes* belong to any secular sphere. This false perception of troubadour lyric is partly conditioned by a widespread belief that the Provençal-speaking areas were less religious than Northern France. Such a simplistic opposition between Northern French bigotry and the emancipated spirit that allegedly prevailed in Occitania is deeply anachronistic and may be due to an exaggerated view of Catharism's role in forming Provençal poetry. By the time heresy reached its peak in Occitania, troubadour poetry had already had a long history in the region's cultural landscape. Moreover, one has to take into account that Catharism was in no way limited to Occitania. Its first appearance in the West relates

mostly to Northern Italy, from where it spread not only to Occitania but also to Old French-speaking zones and the Germanic world, including the Rhine valley and Netherlands. However, it is striking to see that besides Languedoc, Catharism was well implanted in Northern Italy and in Catalonia, two places that also corresponds to the area of diffusion of troubadour's poetry.

Likewise, it is an exaggeration to suggest that the invasion of Languedoc in 1209, and the annexation of Languedoc to France in 1229, put an end to Provençal poetry. Languedoc was only one country among others in a region where troubadours flourished. Actually, the history of troubadour poetry involved many other provinces besides the region invaded by the French crusaders. Indeed, the cradle of troubadour poetry was Poitou; Bernart of Ventadorn's and Gaucelm Faidit's homeland was Limousin; Bertran de Born and Arnaut Daniel both came from Périgord; Peire d'Alvernha stemmed from Auvergne; Cercamon and Marcabru were born in Gascony; and Raimbaut of Vaqueiras hailed from Provence *stricto sensu*. Thus, those non-Languedocian troubadours were not affected by the traumatic events that occurred outside their respective provinces. In addition, Catalonia and Northern Italy offered a shelter to many exiled Languedocian poets. And even in Languedoc, the creativity of the local troubadours managed to survive the shock of the invasion, as shown by the role of Toulouse as a conservatory of troubadour poetry down to the second half of the fourteenth century.

Throughout its development, Provençal lyric poetry never ceased to be influenced by a strong religious substrate that had more to do with Catholic orthodoxy than with Albigensian heresy. Even such troubadours as Bernart de Ventadorn or Bertran de Born, who are usually categorized as perfect examples of an allegedly secular blend of poetry, are said to have finished their career in the Cistercian abbey of Dalon.²⁰ Although one is allowed to assume that these facts are nothing but inventions forged by the authors of the *vidas*, the mere possibility to imagine such a conclusion to the biographical sketches of the above-mentioned troubadours reveals how porous the boundaries were between Provençal lyrical poetry and its religious substrate. There were also many troubadours who made vows of another kind, namely the vows to take part in a crusade. The first troubadour William IX, Duke of Aquitaine who clashed with ecclesiastical authorities and nonetheless participated in two holy wars: the defense of the Holy Land in the aftermath of the First Crusade (1101-2), and the victory of Cutunda in 1120, an important episode of the Aragonese Reconquista. Even if one assumes that the flourishing of lyrical poetry in

²⁰ Boutière, Schutz, and Cluzel, *op. cit.*, pp. 21; 27; 68.

Occitania was tantamount to secularization, there are many indications that the trend to achieve autonomy from the sacred sphere was a reversible process. The allegedly emancipated troubadours could at any moment reintegrate the clerical framework from which they had drawn the poetic and musical skills they brilliantly displayed during their literary career.

The suggestion that the sacred sphere exerted unchallenged supremacy in medieval society applies to countries other than France or Occitania. Indeed, the same process holds true for the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula or the territories of the Holy Roman Empire. Still, an approach focusing on the French and Occitan cultural region, a considerable part of which was annexed by the Kingdom of France as early as 1229, is justified by the proximity of the French and Occitan literary heritages, as well as extra-textual factors like the Kingdom of France's privileged status as "Ally of the Papacy." Unlike the German emperors—who contended with the papacy either on spiritual issues such as the investiture of the bishops, or on such practical matters as control of Italy—the Capetian monarchy tried to restore the Israelite kingdom's Biblical model in Western Europe. Except for Philip II, who took the imperial title of Augustus, most French kings strove to imitate David and Solomon, as shown by the ritual of royal unction performed at their coronation. Moreover, the kings of Jerusalem, whose title was homonymous with that of the Kings of Judah, were of French-speaking background. This may have corroborated the impression that medieval France wished to continue the Biblical legacy on a political level. Such historical background may justify associating sacredness with a literature produced in the territory of *Ecclesiae Primogenita Filia*, a title that reminds of one of the names of Israel in the Bible (Exodus 4:22).

Viewing whole areas of the medieval literary horizon as a secular field is an error ascribable to the circumstances in which these texts were rediscovered in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the rise of medieval philology corresponds to a period of intense *Kulturkampf* between clericalism and liberalism in fully Catholic countries such as France, Italy, and Austria, and the partially Catholic Germany. Admittedly, it is usually thought that the renewal of medieval studies in France and Germany was triggered by a Catholic-oriented kind of Romanticism. Chateaubriand's seminal *Génie du christianisme*, published in 1802, as well as Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel's interest in troubadours, were determinants in promoting the study of languages and literatures from the Middle Ages. However, increased interest in the Middle Ages was motivated by other factors besides Catholic conservatism. The Brothers Grimm searched for early Germanic sources, which might also contextualize the focus on late

antique or early medieval sources. Since very little information is available about the Teutonic world before Tacitus' description of the Germanic tribes, the shift from South-oriented Classicism toward North-oriented Romanticism may by itself explain the switch from the obsession for antiquity toward a fascination with the Middle Ages. An objective collusion between Clericalism and the interest for the Middle Ages only occurred after Romanticism was recuperated of by a reactionary agenda.

Nevertheless, links between growing neo-Catholicism and a rediscovery of the Middle Ages weakened when the academic world became interested in medieval studies. The emergence of medieval philology as a scientific field was actually born around 1860 with the activities of the German Karl Bartsch and the French Gaston Paris who got his skills in medieval philology in the University of Göttingen, far away from the banks of Seine. During this post-Romantic period, instruments elaborated by classical philology were transferred to the study of medieval texts written in vernacular. By the time it was founded, this alternative blend of philology was strongly influenced by the method and spirit of secular positivism. This ideological orientation may have induced the founders of medieval studies to recognize that their research focused on an attempted emancipation from clericalism—a process in which they were themselves involved. From this perspective, various medieval authors were acclaimed as the forerunners of such modern trends of thought as materialism or anticlericalism. Peter Abelard attempted to promote a *sic et non* dialectic capable of challenging the authority of some retrograde priests and was later proclaimed a champion of rationalism against obscurantism. Jehan de Meun, who continued the *Romance of the Rose*, was hailed a freethinker *ante litteram*. Rutebeuf, who tried to fight the influence of the mendicant orders in 1254-5, was seen as a harbinger of Third Republic efforts to reduce Catholic Church's attempt to exert power in the field of education. Guillaume de Saint-Amour's struggle against the friars was wrongly perceived as secular. As a matter of fact, the conflict between Bonaventure and Guillaume is first and foremost a conflict within the sphere of sacred knowledge—a merely theological quarrel.²¹

As to François Villon, he was retroactively credited with a revolutionary or anarchic spirit. Yet, like many delinquents, he never really challenged the legitimacy of the system at the expense of which he was trying to survive.

Although there may be a kernel of truth in some perspectives on these medieval personalities, it is not certain that a bipolar approach, which strongly opposes a sacred sphere to a secular one, is justified in the study

²¹ Dufeil, *Guillaume de Saint-Amour et la polémique universitaire parisienne: 1250-1259*, p. xx.

of earlier medieval literature. Thus, my use of the terms *sacred* and *secular* in this study's title is only provisional. One of my purposes is precisely to suggest another interpretative model which would be more appropriate to the medieval context. An interesting attempt to refine the description of the relationship between the sacred and the secular in High Middle Ages was recently made by Dorothea Kullman who proposed to describe the dynamic of sacred and profane (profane rather than secular) as an elastic interaction rather than a bipolarized coexistence of two cultures.²²

If a secular dimension existed at all in the medieval West's cultural landscape, it was by no means separated from the sacred sphere, as shown by the use of the adjective *saecularis* "secular" to refer to the non-regular clergy. In this specific meaning, "secular" means "mundane", that is, involved in the reality of the laymen. In the semantic horizon of the Middle Ages, the antithesis of "secular" is not "sacred" but "regular" (*regularis*), that is, regulated by the rule of a monastic order. Obviously, both the secular and the regular priests were part of the sacred sphere. Even the secular clerics who tried to resist the mendicant orders' infiltration into the university were not secular in the modern meaning but rather in the sense that they were not monks.

The case of Catharism exemplifies the power of inclusion exerted by the sacred sphere on the cultural landscape of the Middle Ages. The Church chose to treat the followers of this religious movement as heretical Christians rather than believers of another religion. People convicted of Catharism were originally excommunicated and, drastic as it may sound, this measure nevertheless left them a chance to repent. This method ultimately proved ineffective and later heretics were persecuted and savagely executed. Even the deceased were not left in peace: their corpses were exhumed in order to be burned in a kind of *post mortem* retaliation or purification. This extreme violence confirms that heretics were considered part and parcel of the same landscape. Had they been perceived as complete aliens, the Church would not have spent so much effort deterring them from their convictions, or even purging them from the sin of heresy through physical torment. The same logic of inclusion that applied to heretics also applied to Jews, who were similarly integrated into the Christian sacred sphere. Their very existence as a humiliated nation was considered testimony of the New Testament's truth. Actually, Jews living in Christian Europe were far from being alien to the cultural landscape of their non-Jewish surroundings. Nor were they impermeable to some

²² Kullman, *The Church and Vernacular Literature in Medieval France*, pp. 7-8.