Introduction

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For most scholars, the religious landscape of late medieval Central Europe is familiar terrain. Its geography was most famously mapped in the early twentieth century by the Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga. Casting this period as one of decay and decline, Huizinga shaped the historiography of the late Middle Ages for succeeding generations. The church's moral and institutional failings called forth the reforming efforts of first Jan Hus in Bohemia and then a century later Martin Luther in Germany. But as John Van Engen has recently reminded us, "any historical period called 'late' is headed for interpretive trouble."[1] During the past decade in particular, a number of scholars have reexamined this period and region with fresh eyes.

The three articles in this forum represent a new revisionist approach to Central Europe and the late medieval church. What emerges is not a picture of slow decline or a narrative that moves inevitably toward Luther and the Reformation. Instead, we discover a richer and more variegated world of religious life and expression. In the first article, David Mengel explores the Prague of Emperor Charles IV (1346–1378). He views religious developments in this setting as a product of confessional currents circulating across the continent as a whole and calls into question a well-established historiography that interprets this period as an incubator of reform, leading ineluctably from the emperor to the Hussites and eventually to the Reformation itself. James Mixson's investigation of Benedictine reform in Bavaria and Austria squarely addresses the problematic nature of the fifteenth century. Mixson has fixed his attention on perhaps the most stubborn of those late medieval stereotypes: the wealthy and dissolute monk who embodied the corruption Reformation leaders so hated. By examining the debates around monastic property and wealth, Mixson, like Mengel, also works synchronically as he places his story within the wider context of the Observant movement and offers a more nuanced account of religious reform in the generation before Luther. Christopher Ocker turns to the Reformation itself. Instead of examining the Lutheran revolution as the theological culmination of a long tradition of reform, Ocker considers its almost accidental nature as he investigates the complicated disputes that arose once secular princes began to confiscate ecclesiastical property. Together the three articles illustrate the creative new ways in which scholars have returned to old territory yet have

[1]John Van Engen, "Multiple Options: The World of the Fifteenth Century Church," *Church History* 77 (2008): 257.

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found a very different landscape than the one originally described by Huizinga now nearly a century ago.

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