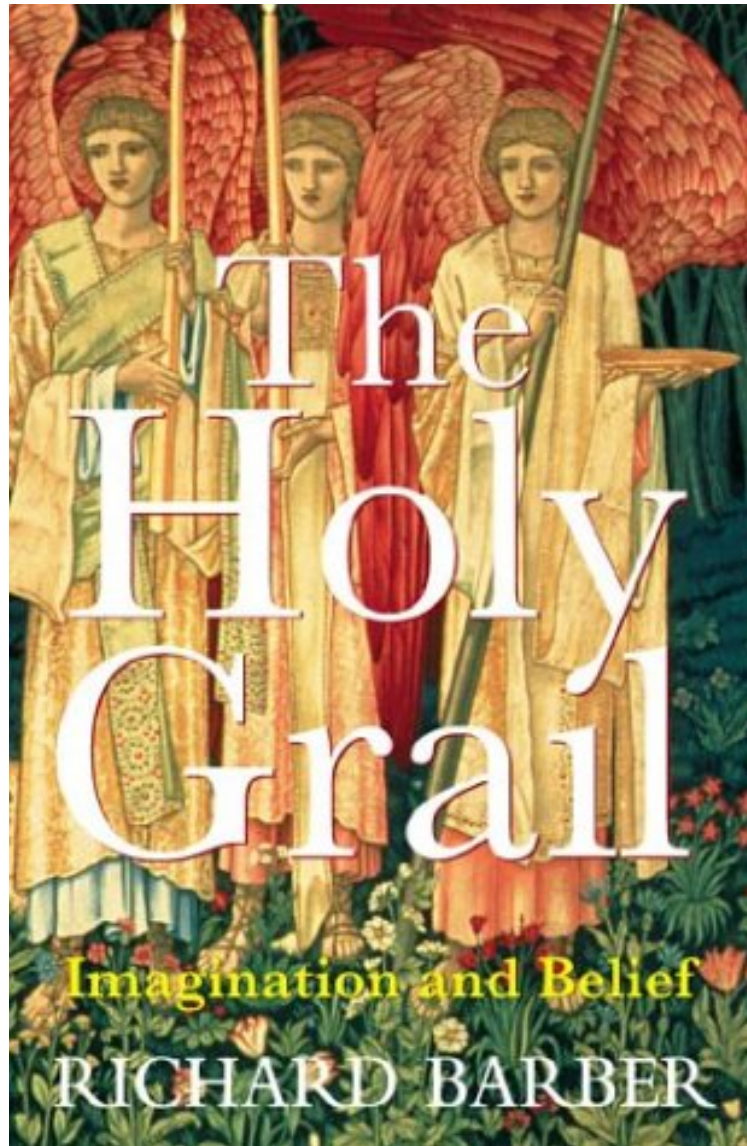


## The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief

*Richard Barber*

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**Richard Barber : The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. An engrossing questBy Caleb HansonA study of the Holy Grail, its history and significance in literature and faith, from its first appearance in the last, unfinished romance of Chrtien de Troyes to its contemporary, completely secular usage as "sought-after unattainable ideal." Barber (famous authority on medieval history and the culture of chivalry) says that when he started the project he expected to be exploring Celtic

myth and legend; somewhat to his surprise, he instead found himself digging deeper into medieval Christian theology and spirituality than he ever thought possible. The book falls into three parts: a review in some depth of the first "generation" of Grail romances (approx. 1180-1250); an analysis of what the Grail "meant" in those early, formative years; and a higher-level overview of modern (that is, post-medieval) Grail literature. I found the first part useful, the second part very interesting, and the third part draggy -- but that might vary depending on whether the reader starts out more familiar with the medieval or the modern literature. There's mention of Monty Python, a couple pages on the Holy Blood, Holy Grail / Da Vinci Code conspiracy theory, and one allusion to "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy."<sup>2</sup> of 2 people found the following review helpful. exhaustive sober engrossing

By Konrad Baumeister Barber's book on the Holy Grail comes at a good time, a time when a little sober research about the history of the Grail, the myths and legends around it, are sorely needed. There has been a staggering amount of twaddle written in the last 20 years on this subject; Barber does an excellent job of gently (sometimes not so gently) debunking it, and setting the actual facts before one. The book covers in detail the texts of the various Grail romances, who wrote them, for whom, how they were altered or amended or changed or added to, and discusses each romance in thorough detail. One is surprised upon examining these texts to learn how different in focus and message some of them were. Barber then moves on to works covering the Grail after the (very compressed) time of the original romances, and shows the spreading of the story into popular works, including art, literature, legend and fairy tale. Multiple excellent illustrations and plates accompany the text. And finally we read of the Grail in modern culture, from Indiana Jones to Monty Python to the fantasies of the Holy Blood Holy Grail variety. Barber approaches the subject as a historian, warm to the subject but objective, wanting only to understand and explain. He is understanding of the religious implications of the Grail mythos, explicating it fairly, though he himself is not religious. His writing is clear and fluid throughout, and exhibits something of a very dry and sly humor as well. The book is long, but each subject is truly exhaustively explored; the more modern material is all addressed, and there is a lot of it, some of it pretty out there. The most excessive stuff is discussed and made short work of. Throughout, the work concentrates on the historical development of the Grail legends, the question of what the Grail actually itself might be, and the spread and popularization of the Grail in culture. This is a very welcome book on a fascinating subject.

42 of 43 people found the following review helpful. The Holy Grail as a key to self-identity

By Kerry Walters Richard Barber begins this magisterial study of the Holy Grail archetype with these words: "The Grail is a mysterious and haunting image, which crosses the borders of fiction and literature and which, for eight centuries, has been a recurrent ideal in Western literature"--and, as he makes clear in the book, in Western art, religion, spirituality, and psychology as well. Almost all of us have heard about the Grail (especially recently in all the hype over Dan Brown's thriller "The Da Vinci Code"), but almost none of us really know much about it. This is too bad, because the Grail legend is replete with meaning that gestures at the very core of who we are as humans. The merits of Barber's book are many, but two in particular stand out. In the first place, he provides an exhaustive and entertaining discussion of the origins of the Grail legend, the various authors (such as Chretien de Troyes, Robert de Boron, and Wolfram von Eschenbach) who popularized the legend in the Middle Ages, and the symbolism behind the legends--how it ties in, for example, with the Eucharist. Secondly, he reflects in insightful and sometimes profound ways on just what the Grail legend means to us today, tracing the modern Grail expressions that abound in art, cinema (yes, "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" is discussed!), and literature. Barber is especially good at discussing the human longing for perfection and wholeness that the Grail quest symbolizes, and in speculating on why the Grail archetype holds such strong attraction. Part of the key to understanding its appeal lies in the fact that it is a product of the interplay between two essential human characteristics: belief and imagination (hence the book's subtitle). The proper hiding place of the Grail, in other words, is in the liminal space between imagination and belief. In focusing on archetypes such as the Grail, humans explore depths of themselves that otherwise might go unnoticed. The book is wonderfully illustrated--as well it should be, since the Grail has been such a common motif in art--with intertextual black and white reproductions and a center section of color photographs which are really quite breathtaking in their beauty. If you're a long-devoted Grail enthusiast, or if you're just beginning the pilgrimage and want a resource that can help you understand, for example, just who the heck the Fisher King is, this is the book for you.

The Holy Grail, as created and conceived by Chretien de Troyes in the late 12th century, had no obvious religious or Christian connotations but appeared in a story of chivalric adventure involving the knight Perceval. By the medieval period the Grail was to be found at the centre of the Christian church, within its liturgy and art. This superb book tells the history of the Grail from its origins in romance literature to its role as a central object of the Christian faith, its decline during the Reformation and its resurgence in recent years, devoid of its religious connotations. The intricacies and complexities of its meaning throughout history are explored in detail, especially its links with Joseph of Arimathea, with Christ's blood and the Last Supper, its power as a restorer and sustainer of life, and its mysticism in general. Whether a dish, bowl, vessel or chalice, the Grail became an exciting topic for later writers and theologians to explore and utilise, and Richard Barber suggests why this was the case. Well written, detailed and thoroughly absorbing, this is an excellent book.

Barber is an Arthurian expert whose purpose is to hack a path through the muddled, corrupted and conflicting versions of the grail story...[He] is scrupulous in his fairness, his conclusions are interesting and although he keeps his reins tight on some fun he might have had, he performs a valuable service in rescuing the original grail from 800 years of garbled and improbable misreadings. (Nicholas Shakespeare Daily Telegraph 2004-01-17)Richard Barber's splendid new book presents a comprehensive survey of the search for the Holy Grail from the 12th century to the present day. It is part summary of the medieval romances and part synthesis of the commentary and interpretation that the Holy Grail has attracted...[T]his is a rich book, and like the romances it discusses, taps into a seemingly unending well of meaning. Barber has created a splendid foundation for a continuation to a compelling story. (Juliette Wood The Times 2004-01-17)This is a stimulating study, which authoritatively explores one of the most enduring myths of Western culture. Its combination of scholarship and clarity might itself be described as an intellectual Holy Grail. (Michael Arditti Daily Mail 2004-01-16)Richard Barber, who possesses both the medievalist expertise and the requisite calmness and clarity of thought...has produced a really valuable and fascinating book...Not only has Richard Barber dealt skilfully with the original medieval evidence; he has also traced the long after-life of the Grail legend, above all in its various 19th- and 20th-century avatars. This not only gives him the chance to investigate some modern literary history (Charles Williams, John Cowper Powys, et al); it also enables him to take a properly historical attitude to the various 'loony tunes' modern theories, by setting them in their own historical context...Overall, then, this is the most reassuringly sane of all modern writings on the whole 'Holy Grail' phenomenon. One finishes the book just wishing there were more works like it. (Noel Malcolm Sunday Telegraph 2004-01-18)This book is a survey, as judicious as it is comprehensive, of versions of the Grail story, of the social and ideological contexts in which they evolved, of the symbols they employ and the literary conventions which shaped them. In it, Barber arrives at the conclusion, which will be shocking to new agers and conspiracy theorists everywhere, that the story of the Holy Grail had (in its original form) nothing to do with the cabbala, Cathars, Templars, Zoroastrians or Gnostics, that its origin is probably the obvious one, the first text in which it appears. The story of the Holy Grail is not a fragment of immemorially ancient lore: Chrétien de Troyes, the 12th-century author of the *Le Roman de Perceval*, made it up...In a book which consists largely of summaries of numerous versions of a single story some repetition is inevitable--this is a volume to browse in rather than one to read straight through--but Barber's sensitivity to the diversity of nuances in each of his many sources ensures that each one he looks at affords him some fresh insight. The result is a fascinating compendium of theology, literary criticism and cultural history. (Lucy Hughes-Hallett Sunday Times 2004-02-01)Barber...demonstrates a gift for lucid, lively prose and an ability to make highly complex developments--cutting across religion, literature and politics--both immediate and accessible...[He] does a dexterous job of conveying the mood and texture of [the] variations on the Grail story, while at the same time illuminating the religious and political dramas that informed their creation...[M]akes for engaging reading as both literary criticism and cultural history, thanks largely to the author's fluency and aplomb as a writer. (Michiko Kakutani New York Times 2004-02-20)Consistently fascinating...It is essential reading for anyone interested in Arthurian romances and, chapter after chapter, offers sober correctives to countless misconceptions about the Grail and its supposed secret meanings...I doubt that anywhere else will one find so thorough and comprehensive an examination of the Grail, nor as careful and interesting a survey of the medieval stories that started it all. The Holy Grail is a major contribution to Arthuriana. (Eric Wargo Washington Times 2004-04-04)What we need is a cool-headed guide through the Grail's long and curious history, and in Richard Barber's lucid, fair-minded, and wide-ranging book, we get it. (Richard Jenkyns New Republic 2004-10-04)About the AuthorRichard Barber is one of Britain's leading authorities on medieval history and the author of *The Penguin Guide to Medieval Europe* and *The Knight and Chivalry*. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.[http://www.hup.harvard.edu/pdf/BARHOL\\_excerpt.pdf](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/pdf/BARHOL_excerpt.pdf)