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Bryan Spinks is well known to liturgists and historians for his numerous excellent studies in liturgy and theology. For more than three decades Spinks has written with sustained intelligence, opening up new subjects and contributing some lucid and comprehensive analysis on a variety of issues, ranging from the Anaphora of Addai and Mari, through the Sanctus in the eucharistic prayer, to Luther’s liturgical reforms. In the book under review here Spinks provides a thoughtful survey of the liturgy of baptism, its origins, its development, and its various theologies, from the New Testament to the Council of Trent. Summarising a millennium and a half of a multifaceted religious-cultural phenomenon in 150 pages is not an easy task, but Spinks’ »Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism« proves that it can be done in an admirable way.

The book contains eight chapters. The first three chapters, which form the book’s first part, deals with the early Christian period, and survey the New Testament origins (chapter 1); the pre-Nicene developments in Syria and Asia Minor, Rome and Italy, North Africa, and Egypt (chapter 2); and the picture that emerges from fourth- and fifth-century commentaries and mystagogical catecheses on the rite of baptism (chapter 3). The second part of the book opens with two chapters on the formation and theology of the Eastern rite of baptism, both in the Syrian and Maronite traditions (chapter 5) and in the Byzantine, Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopic traditions (chapter 5). These chapters are followed by two chapters on the Western rites of the early Middle Ages (chapter 6) and the later Middle Ages (chapter 7). The last chapter is a brief conclusion, in which the author summarises some of the most important points of his survey. As Spinks clearly demonstrates, both historically and theologically all baptismal rituals looked back to the baptism of Christ. Whereas a great diversity characterised the early Eastern rites, on the whole a ritual osmosis seems to have been underway. Similarly, in the West, although the various liturgical traditions retained their distinctive rituals, the Gallican baptismal rite, as represented by the »Old Gelasian Sacramentary«, became the standard. The local traditions and variations, which characterised the Western rite throughout the Middle Ages, came to an end with the standardising aims of the Council of Trent.

»Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism« is a splendid textbook, written with an exceptional verve and clarity. Spinks’ careful, perceptive and engaging discussions, and his firm grasp of the sources, both primary and secondary, makes this book a compulsory reading for anyone interested in the formation and theologies of Baptism.