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Anthony Levi. *Renaissance and Reformation: The Intellectual Genesis.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. xi + 483 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09333-9; $26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-10346-5.

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In Pursuit of Human Dignity

Prolific author and professor emeritus Anthony Levi's recent book is a survey of western European intellectual developments from the fourteenth century to 1535. Levi views this period as one of Whiggish progression from scholasticism's dismal portrayal of humanity to humanism's "new and elevated vision of human nature" (p. 2). Furthermore, Levi argues that the Renaissance and Reformation should be thought of as a singular unit. Whether or not one agrees with this assertion, the reasons Levi posits for it are not sufficient. For all the strengths in thinking of historical developments in this way, the connections between medieval scholasticism, Renaissance humanism, and Protestant evangelicalism are far more complex than this book suggests.

Levi has divided his book into three sections of unequal length. The first section, "The Intellectual Problem of the Middle Ages," provides a concise summary of what Levi sees as the problems inherent in scholasticism. This section with its two chapters–"The Intellectual Parameters of Western Christendom" and "The Crisis of Scholasticism"–provides the necessary background and sets the stage for Levi's main foci, the Renaissance and Reformation.

Levi traces the intellectual dead end of scholasticism back to the early church and the problems of translating ideas such as the Trinity and incarnation from Hebrew and Greek into the less philosophically sophisticated Latin. Levi sees this difficulty, as well as the superseding of secular authority by ecclesiastical authority in the West but not the East, as key reasons why the former but not the latter experienced a "Renaissance." Disputes about universals were mainly about Christian orthodoxy and not logic, and attempts to supply scholastic theology with philosophical (mainly Aristotelian) underpinnings were, according to Levi, necessarily unsuccessful. These failed attempts led to the disheartening ideas of Ockham and to the *via moderna*. Supporters of the *via moderna* (which Levi is careful to distinguish from the *devotio moderna*) promoted a gloomy theology according to which God's will was arbitrary and one could never know if what one was doing was right and pleasing: one simply could not affect one's destiny and salvation. Levi denies that Ockham had any conscious Pelagian leanings and that such accusations are the result of "subsequent historians seeking to discover in the theology arising in the wake of the sixteenth-century schisms above all an 'Augustinian,' anti-Pelagian movement" (p. 65).

Such affirmative corrections to historiographical consensus are interspersed with silence about others. For instance, I found it disturbing that Levi repeatedly used the inclusive term "human dignity" in this section, failing to indicate that this usage in fact only referred to men. The humanist phrase "dignity of man" was not synonymous with the dignity of all people since women were definitely excluded. Levi did note in passing the debate about the abilities of women to achieve inner moral conversion. However, this debate (known as the *querelle des femmes*) was a purely rhetorical exercise with few, if any, tangible results of a positive sort for female contempo-

raries. Levi's comment that "the renaissance found a society ready to welcome, wherever it could be found, an elevation of human dignity and a new social status for women" (p. 364) reveals a lack of awareness of developments in the last two decades of women's history, beginning with Joan Kelly's argument that the term "Renaissance" is a misnomer since at least half the population experienced not an increase but decrease in worth (and, hence, dignity).[1]

The second section, "Towards a Resolution," comprises the bulk of the text. Levi argues that Ockham's ideas gave rise to a number of responses from people desperate to exercise some degree of influence over their own destiny, including an ever-increasing use of ritual in an attempt to fulfill "the facientibus … principle," meditation, and other religious experiences in an attempt to achieve inner moral conversion, the purchase of posthumous prayers and indulgences to lessen one's time in purgatory, and the rise of Renaissance humanism with its promotion of "human dignity." This section deals with these responses to the crisis created by Ockhamism and by the *via moderna*, with the most attention devoted to the *studia humanitatis*. A chapter is devoted to the growth of the *devotio moderna* in the Low Countries.

According to Levi, humanism was a response to the arbitrariness of the *via moderna*. Humanists sought to promote the dignity and moral potential of man and mined ancient texts to support their contention. Plato and Plotinus were the main authors upon which this new dignity of man was based, which necessitated knowledge of Greek. Greek studies began in Florence in the early-fifteenth century and spread slowly to the rest of Europe, with inroads in England, France, and many German states only in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries. Contrary to scholastics, who believed that philosophy was contrary to religion, humanists felt that knowledge of philosophy was necessary for understanding the Christian faith. Nonetheless, the works of the early Greek church fathers and the Greek text of the Bible were the primary impetus behind the study of Greek: "the principal function of Greek in the renaissance was the establishment of a spirituality and a theology which drew heavily on Greek tradition and led in the end to the establishment and dissemination of the authentic texts of scripture in the vernacular" (p. 173-174). Here Levi rejects a dominant view of the Renaissance–that it was primarily educational in nature (as argued by Paul Oskar Kristeller and others)–with little further comment. Rejecting such a consensus with more detailed argument would have made it more convincing.

While humanism was the Italian response to the moral crisis provoked by Ockhamism, northern Europe reacted in a markedly different way. In 1374, Geert Groote founded a movement that came to be known as the *devotio moderna*. This northern reaction carried strong currents of individual spirituality and morality and a repeated denial of the church hierarchy. The focus was, as with humanism, on inner moral conversion; the route, however, was quite different: humanists relied on philosophy and education while Groote's followers placed their faith in mysticism and spirituality. Northern scholars who adopted the *studia humanitatis*, particularly the Germans, tended to combine it with an increasing sense of national identity and a search for, or creation of, a great ancient past (one rivaling or even surpassing the Roman heritage lauded by Florentines and other Italians).

Levi sees Erasmus as the key player in the later Renaissance and Reformation, claiming that Erasmus's earlier work, which criticized indulgences, served as the impetus for Luther's theses. Erasmus was highly influential. He was the first to successfully combine both of the major responses to Ockham: the neoplatonism of humanism and the *devotio moderna*. Erasmus promoted Paul's trichotomy of body/soul/spirit as a means of overcoming the unsatisfactory arbitrariness promulgated by Ockham. Erasmus, like Luther, believed in the necessity of inner moral conversion to salvation. However, unlike Luther, Erasmus believed that human nature was capable of moral perfection. Because of his immense influence, Erasmus faced extreme pressure from all sides. Nonetheless, he astutely avoided being used as a pawn by anyone, not supporting Luther's schism but continuing to advocate for reform from within the church itself.

Levi presents a picture of European culture in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as one of fear and disillusionment, in which people participated in an ever-increasing number of rituals and purchased ever more outrageous indulgences with little hope of appeasing an arbitrary God. (The author makes only one brief mention near the end of the book that this may not, in fact, have been the case.) This picture is drawn in stark contrast to the research of J. J. Scarisbrick and Eamon Duffy on pre-Reformation England, in which they argue that the majority of the populace was content with the daily, seasonal, and annual cycle of rituals and drew a great deal of comfort from them; John Guy argues that church attendance in post-Reformation England dropped substantially because of the loss of these rituals.[2] In light of a growing predominance of research like this, Levi's pre-

sentation is simply unconvincing.

In the shorter third and final section, Levi contends that the Reformation(s) were more the result of political power struggles than religious matters. While this argument is not entirely new, Levi does make it convincingly. Power struggles between various western European nation-states as well as jurisdictional disputes between each of these states and the papacy are discussed throughout the book, from the collapse of strong secular authority in the West after the fall of Rome to the fourteenth-century power struggles in the church over control of secular affairs and ecclesiastical administration with secular governments (Great Schism, Avignon Papacy) to the unification of a few nation-states to the power struggles between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. Political struggle, however, is only one of two elements that Levi believes combined to produce the schisms of the sixteenth century, the other factor being cultural rivalries.

Levi chose to end this study of Renaissance and Reformation in 1535/6, a date that many readers will find premature. A discussion of Geneva's Calvinism, the many religious reforms in England, the religious wars in France, or the Council of Trent would have influenced Levi's presentation of the Reformation and would have helped to strengthen his argument that the reformations and counter-reformations of the sixteenth century were more cultural-political than doctrinal.

The lack of a bibliography is a definite drawback, compounded by inconvenient endnotes. Still, Levi packs an incredible wealth of knowledge into this book, so much so that it would probably overwhelm many undergraduate readers. While he does cite a few works published as recently as 2001, a large number of the works which he refers to are quite dated. Also, he has failed to address Erika Rummel's significant conceptual research on the development humanist, even though it appeared in 1998.[3] Nonetheless, this book is definitely well worth reading. Levi's thesis that the religious crisis of the later Middle Ages led to the Renaissance and that there was no dramatic intellectual shift between the Renaissance and the Reformation is provocative and thought-provoking, even if in the end I was still not entirely convinced.

Notes

[1]. Joan Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 19-50.

[2]. J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1984); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992); John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[3]. Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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