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Franz Posset. *Renaissance Monks: Monastic Humanism in six Biographical Sketches.*
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Renaissance Monks

For most laymen the very title of this book is an oxymoron. In fact, even for most students of the Renaissance, though they may hesitate to admit it, the very concepts of Renaissance humanism and monasticism seem incongruent. Many arguments can be made for the sense of fundamental incompatibility of what is taken as the quintessentially medieval ideal of Christian perfection and the renascent *studia humanitatis*. Yet to the extent that such a tendency today is based on uncritical acceptance of stereotypes, it should be pointed out that Renaissance humanists themselves were the first to revel in such stereotypical portrayals of monks and monasticism as antipodes to their cultural and spiritual endeavors. As evidence of this point, it should suffice to mention Erasmus of Rotterdam's caustic portrayal of the robustly unlearned abbot Antronius in the *Colloquia Familiaria* (first edition, 1518), who emerges from his irritated discussion with a learned matron an utter fool and poor Christian.

For many of Erasmus's younger contemporaries who (unlike him) joined the Protestant cause, monasticism became the epitome of all that was wrong in "medieval" Christendom. Thus, for instance, the humanist Lutheran theologian and educator Philipp Melanchthon repeatedly referred to monks and monasticism as products of the degeneration of Christianity after antiquity. In a succinct oration, *De Luthero et aetatibus Ecclesiae* (1548), Melanchthon labels the period in church history from the fall of the western Roman Empire to the "expurgation of doctrine through Martin Luther" as the Age of the Monks, characterized by a steep cultural decline, with the fall from pure apostolic doctrine inevitably following at its heels. Certainly neither Erasmus, who did not object to monasticism in principle though he personally found it distasteful, nor the Protestant reformers offer us a balanced and fair account of the monastic tradition, but their statements make clear that the seeming incongruity between the culture of Renaissance humanism and monasticism, even if a fallacy, is itself a legacy of the Renaissance.

To challenge this stereotype, Franz Posset offers a study of individual humanist monks, and thereby a group portrait of monastic humanism, from the late fifteenth century to the 1540s. The six biographical sketches are devoted to generally lesser known German Benedictine and Cistercian monks: Conradus Leontorius (c.1460-1511), a Cistercian of Maulbronn; Benedictus Chelidonius (c.1460-1521), a Benedictine of the Nuremberg St. Aegidius monastery; Bolfgangus Marius (1469-1544), abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Aldersbach; Henricus Urbanus, a Cistercian of Georgenthal; Veit (Vitus) Bild (1481-1529), of the Benedictine abbey of SS. Ulrich and Afra in Augsburg; and a Benedictine of Ottobeuren, Nikolaus Ellenbog (1481-1543).

At the outset, the author points out that while recent Reformation studies have tended to stress the role of various social groups in the cultural and religious changes of their time, monastic humanists, usually confined to distant monasteries in the countryside and thus far removed from the cultural hub of Renaissance cities and courts, have, on the whole, been neglected by modern scholarship. To this could be added a further argument:

much of the scholarship devoted to German humanism up to the 1520s has been carried out with the Reformation in mind. This focus is understandable, especially when we consider the role played in the Reformation's early years by its humanist adherents. Few today would argue with Bernd Moeller's dictum of 1959, "Ohne Humanismus keine Reformation," or the work of Lewis Spitz, to name but one prominent Anglo-Saxon authority, which have taught us the intricate dependence of the early Reformation on shifts in cultural and spiritual sensitivities ushered in by northern humanism. Since it is the historian's instinct and task to trace the roots of historical occurrences, Renaissance and Reformation scholarship is therefore highly attentive to anti-monastic sentiment, not to mention the contentious field of anticlericalism, on the eve of the Reformation as a cause, or at the very least harbinger, of great events to come. We are, quite rightly, well acquainted with the lives of several monks and friars who abandoned their monastic vows following Luther, some of whom became prominent Reformers in their own right. Bearing in mind the momentous reforms of the sixteenth century, the caveat against a teleological view of earlier events in a narrative framework of "the inexorable course of" rather than a history of moral, intellectual and religious choices, is poignantly relevant when dealing with the "spent force" of monasticism on the eve of the Reformation. Learned monks, like their non-cloistered contemporaries, made conscious and often difficult choices. As these short biographies demonstrate, nothing inexorable or even predictable influenced these decisions.

Another important point Posset makes in the introduction to his work is the correlation of monastic humanism and the preceding monastic reform movements of the fifteenth century. Of particular relevance here is the reform movement stemming from the Lower Austrian Benedictine abbey of Melk, which was adopted by some of the south German Benedictine abbeys discussed in this study. The question of such a correlation is especially relevant in the case of Leontorius, who became secretary to the reform-minded head of his order, the abbot of CÃ®teaux Jean de Cirey (d. 1503), in the years of the latter's reform attempts (1489-95). Posset dwells on Leontorius's six years as secretary to Cirey, but unfortunately does not offer a discussion of how his experiences at the very center of a monastic reform movement might have influenced his views on humanist learning and outlooks.

Though the present study includes no systematic discussion of exactly what is meant by humanism or humanists, the author in effect takes the following as hallmarks of humanism in this context: an interest in the three ancient languages (regardless of the degree of mastery), an interest in Neo-Latin poetry conveying classical imagery and jargon and most importantly, integration into the self-aware network of humanist contacts and epistolary friendships. The pronounced support for Johannes Reuchlin in the (in)famous Reuchlin Affair by some of the monks studied here is convincingly taken by Posset as an indication not only of a scholarly interest in Hebrew, but of a conscious membership in a well-defined humanist milieu.

The six biographical sketches are worth discussing in detail. Leontorius later became confessor to the nuns of Engental, although he eventually returned to Maulbronn. He was befriended by Jakob Wimpfeling, Conrad Pellican, and most importantly by Johannes Amerbach, whose son Bonifacius he tutored. Leontorius collaborated on several of Amerbach's patristic and biblical editorial endeavors. He was also highly esteemed by Reuchlin. The chapter ends with an appraisal of his importance as biblical scholar who cleared the way for the later heyday of humanist biblical scholarship. Tantalizingly, however, this highly interesting point is not elaborated in the biography and it is not quite clear, to readers less acquainted with Leontorius's biblical scholarship, how his work presaged the great achievements of humanist biblical scholarship soon to come.

Chelidonius, a Greek scholar and neo-Latin poet, transferred to Vienna in 1514 to the *Schottenstift*, where he became abbot in 1518. Posset dwells at length on his Christocentric poetry, the "Great Passion" and the "Little Passion" (1511), developed in tandem with DÃ¼rer's woodcuts. Chelidonius collaborated with DÃ¼rer on further occasions, most famously by writing the translated Latin text for the imperial Triumphal Arch for Emperor Maximilian. His ties to the Habsburg dynasty are also expressed in his morality play *Voluptatis cum Virtute disceptatio* (1515), which featured the young Habsburg Archduke of Burgundy and future emperor Charles V, for whom the play was performed. Chelidonius belonged to the circle around Willibald Pirckheimer and dedicated his "Little Passion" to his sister Caritas, the abbess of St Clara. Pirckheimer may have been influenced by him to approve of the Reformation in its early years. After the Leipzig Disputation, Chelidonius distanced himself from Johannes Eck, with whom he had collaborated earlier. He composed several prefaces to Johannes Cochlaeus's editions of ancient authors. His interest in historiography included a dedicatory poem to Johannes Cuspinianus'

1515 edition of Otto of Freising's *Gesta Friderici*.

Bolfgangus Marius studied in Heidelberg under Rudolf Agricola, Reuchlin, and Wimpfeling. He became abbot of Aldersbach in 1514, where he attempted certain monastic reforms. Marius composed Christian poetry, including an epic on the life of Christ. His historiographical and poetic interests were combined in his verse history of the War of the Landshut Inheritance, which he experienced at first hand (1508). Marius also wrote a chronicle of his monastery reaching the year 1542, the *Annales sive Chronicon domus Alderspacensis*. Unlike Chelidonius, who died four years before the Peasants' War, a turning point in the attitudes of many members of this generation to Martin Luther, Marius vehemently opposed Luther and the Reformation.

Henricus Urbanus was a close friend of Conrad Mutian and Georg Spalatin. Mutian's correspondence is one of the main sources for his biography. Urbanus did not publish any works of his own but did publish devotional poetry by the Croatian poet, Marcus Marulus. Marulus's *Carmen* (1513), Posset argues, should be understood in the context of the popularity of Christocentric poetry before the Reformation. Spalatin, later advisor to Frederick the Wise and one of Luther's closest allies, worked in Georgenthal as librarian (1505-08) and was a close friend of Urbanus. In 1508 Urbanus was temporarily exiled to Leipzig following a sex scandal. At Mutian's bidding he wrote a letter in Reuchlin's defense in 1513. During the Peasants' War the Georgenthal monastery was destroyed. Posset writes, "During these early years of the Reformation Urbanus developed a personal friendship with Melanchthon at Wittenberg, but he never seems to have adopted Luther's teachings" (p. 125), but unfortunately this intriguing point is left as a cryptic reference.

Posset opens the highly interesting biographical sketch of Veit Bild with the thematic crux of monasticism, humanism and Reformation, highly relevant in light of Bild's adherence to Luther's evangelical teaching. Bild studied in Ingolstadt with Jakob Locher, a disciple of Conrad Celtis, and the mathematician Johann Stabius. Leading at first the life of a carefree and "morally lax" humanist poet, he experienced a moral or spiritual conversion following a grave illness. Probably to fulfill vows taken during his illness, he entered the SS. Ulrich and Afra monastery in 1503. His monastic life was informed by what today might be described as humanist spiritual sensitivities: "He wrote in 1506 that the perfect life does not consist in wearing the monastic habit, but in eradicating one's passions. Not the poverty of the cowl, but purity of heart is pleasing to God" (pp. 137ff). Bild's primary monastic responsibility seems to have been as Latin instructor to his monastery's novices. He kept up a correspondence with Heinrich Bebel and with Conrad Peutinger. Apart from aspiring to master the three ancient languages, Bild was concerned with the question of textual emendation and pursued his youthful interest in mathematics, astronomy, astrology, cartography and music. His poetical flare was now employed, inter alia, in composing a liturgical hagiography of St. Jerome. Bild supported Luther's teaching enthusiastically in the early years of the Reformation and wrote several letters to the Wittenberg reformer. He cultivated a friendship with Johannes Oecolampadius during the latter's sojourn in Augsburg, though their friendship cooled in later years when Oecolampadius's espousal of the Zwinglian doctrine of the Eucharist became evident. As with many Luther supporters of this generation, the Peasants' War affected his sympathies for the Reformation; afterwards he no longer attempted to contact Luther. It would be interesting to learn more about his religious attitudes in the final four years of his life, after the Peasants' War. Posset argues convincingly here that being an evangelical monk in the early years of the Reformation, before the emergence of clear confessional boundaries, was not a contradiction, although it could not have happened without a pronounced tension. In this highly interesting biographical sketch, as elsewhere in this study, this tension and its implications are not, to my mind, awarded the attention they deserve.

Nikolaus Ellenbog studied in Heidelberg, Cracow and Montpellier before entering the monastery in 1504, possibly following a vow taken during a severe illness. He was in charge of the abbey's printing press. Ottobeuren was among the monasteries that espoused the Melk reforms. Both Ellenbog and his like-minded abbot, Leonhard Widenmann, were outspoken supporters of Reuchlin. Ellenbog himself attempted to learn Hebrew. Posset dwells on Ottobeuren as a leading center of Hebrew studies, ahead of the Holy Roman Empire's universities. Ellenbog initiated an epistolary friendship with Erasmus and was interested in his Latin New Testament; he supported peasant servitude, however, and blamed Luther for the Peasants' War, which caused the destruction of the abbey's printing press. Yet it is not clear what the Benedictine monk thought of Luther's evangelical teaching–especially before 1525.

As this brief discussion demonstrates, Posset's study raises a number of important questions. That some of them are not awarded a full answer in the biograph-

ical sketches may be due to the fact that the humanist monks studied are not as well documented as, say, Johannes Trithemius or some of their renowned non-cloistered humanist contemporaries. Needless to say, scanty sources are an occupational hazard in studying the rank and file of a given intellectual milieu, and Posset's command of the primary sources and modern scholarship commands respect. I further agree with the author that conscious membership in a network of humanist contacts was a central part of what we might call a "humanist routine" or even "ritualized friendship." In writing to Reuchlin, Erasmus, Peutinger and lesser denizens of the *res publica litteraria*, humanists were not just seeking new manuscripts or personal favors, but in effect taking part in ritual networking. Posset is right to stress these contacts and affiliations throughout the book. Unfortunately, in the first four biographical sketches, he often does so cumbersomely. The reader, whose curiosity has been whetted by the intriguing points raised by the author, wades through all too many minutiae, which sometimes are highlighted at the expense of a discussion of the important issues Posset raises. For instance, in the second sketch, we are told that Chelidonius distanced himself from Luther's arch-opponent Eck and that he apparently sided with his fellow, non-cloistered, reform-minded Nurembergers (pp. 88ff). This fascinating point raises the question of a favorable response to the Reformation in its early years among monks and suggests that Chelidonius, despite his cloistered life, was very much in touch with the religious proclivities and communal ethos of his city. Regrettably, discussion of this matter is dropped abruptly in favor of a lengthy excursus on the Reuchlin Affair (pp. 89ff), the sole point of which is to state that Chelidonius was mentioned by Pirckheimer in a list of Reuchlin supporters he published in 1517. The importance of humanist networking and mutual references notwithstanding, this approach does not do justice to the subject at hand. All too often the narrative is overburdened with references to humanists who are either mentioned by the monk under discussion or preserved a poem by one of these monks in their manuscripts. Readers would have been better served if many of these references had been relegated to footnotes and the author, whose expertise on the subject is amply demonstrated, had instead offered his opinion more often on some of the issues he raises. These reservations, it must be stressed, do not apply to the latter two biographies (Bild and Ellenbog), especially the sketch of Bild, which is a carefully studied and highly interesting portrait of a cloistered humanist career and an instructive test case for the options and dilemmas facing a learned monk at the momentous crossroads of the early sixteenth century.

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