

**Alexis Fontbonne, Histoire sociale de l'Esprit Saint en Occident. De l'amour divin à l'aumône laïque (XI<sup>e</sup>–XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle), Paris (Beauchesne) 2020, 429 p. (Théologie historique, 130), ISBN 978-2-7010-2304-5, EUR 41,00.**

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It is difficult to think of a larger topic for any medievalist than a social history of the Holy Spirit and its role in legitimizing charitable endeavour between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yet this is the challenge that Alexis Fontbonne has sought to meet in a volume that traces how appeal to the Holy Spirit transformed over this period from being a largely monastic concern to one that was much promoted by lay confraternities within an urban setting. The result is a richly documented monograph that seeks to connect changing theological ideas about the third person of the Trinity to shifts in the understanding of Christian community within a lay context. The author is to be congratulated for daring to cross between the rarified history of theology and the raw realities of religious history.

Inevitably, the volume simplifies big themes. In theory, Christian teaching assigns equal honour to the three persons of the Trinity. Yet the great theological debates of late antiquity focused more around the person of Christ and his relationship to the Godhead than around the Holy Spirit. While Greek Christians traditionally spoke of the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father alone, Augustine recast Latin orthodoxy by defining the Holy Spirit as the mutual love (*caritas*) of both the Father and the Son rather than in terms of the love of God for all creation. Because Augustine, especially in later life, put such emphasis on original sin, he tended to see human capacity to demonstrate love as flawed by human weakness.

Without going into detail on this patristic legacy, Fontbonne rightly singles out the dynamic character of 12<sup>th</sup>-century theology, whether within the context of monasteries or cathedral schools, in offering new ways of thinking about divine love and goodness as operating within human society. He structures his monograph in six major sections: theological traditions and the emergence of lay confraternities; 12<sup>th</sup>-century reflection on *caritas* and the Holy Spirit; lay concern with charitable endeavour; new ecclesiologies in the 13<sup>th</sup> century; lay appropriation of appealing to the third person of the Trinity; the decline in the later medieval period of confraternities dedicated to the Holy Spirit.

A review such as this cannot do justice to the wealth of historical detail provided here, mostly relating to the kingdom of France. The underpinning theme could be construed as the evolution



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of *laïcité*, even if lay confraternities were always defined by their acceptance of clerical authority and patronage. Given that so few records survive of lay thinking about the Holy Spirit, compared to the mass of clerical speculation on the subject, it is clearly valuable to look more closely at how confraternities appealed to the Holy Spirit to legitimize their endeavour. Fontbonne warns against easy oversimplification of understanding about such groups as challenging ecclesiastical authority. Their first concern, at least in theory, was for manifesting concern for the poor. *Caritas*, a term that was used by Augustine in the sense of selfless love between the Father and the Son, evolved into its meaning of charity (*charité*), with all its modern sense of benevolence by those in a position of influence towards those on the margins of society.

Perhaps if there is one area that is a little glossed over, it is that of the vocabulary of love, in particular the evolution of the meaning of *caritas* and *amor*, and their relationship to *eleemosyna*, the foundation of *aumône laïque*, the major focus of this study. 12<sup>th</sup>-century writers, like Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux, had much to say about the character of divine love, giving greater valorisation to *amor* as passionate desire, but were much less articulate about concern for and identification with the poor. It is not always easy to draw connections between theological and charitable endeavour. The first records of confraternities dedicated to the Holy Spirit do not emerge in any significant way before the 13<sup>th</sup> century in towns where communal identity had already been established. Nonetheless, the example of Peter Abelard's decision to dedicate his Oratory to the Paraclete, rather than to the Holy Trinity as a whole, neatly illustrates increasing awareness of the Holy Spirit in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, provoking criticism from those who perceived such a focus as potentially heretical. Cistercian abbeys, always dedicated to the Virgin, preserved a more Christocentric understanding of the Holy Spirit. Fontbonne is good in explaining how by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Holy Spirit became increasingly institutionalised by lay confraternities, which used charitable endeavour as a way of consolidating their position within urban society.

Fontbonne is fully aware of how different groups could shape understanding of the Holy Spirit to reflect current interests. Thus, writers about the Crusades could see such military activity as a movement of the Spirit in a way that not all would accept. Innocent III is rightly seen as promoting a move towards establishing institutions concerned with looking after the poor and the sick. In many ways this reflected the ethos of moralizing thinkers like Peter the Chanter. He sees Peter Lombard as particularly influential in explaining that *caritas* has its origin in the Holy Spirit. The difficulty with this notion is that it could potentially confuse divine and human love, not acknowledging love as a fully human capacity. But this notion could be used to support philanthropic activity as manifesting divine love in action. In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, Francis of Assisi provided a template for those who wanted to see the Holy Spirit as concerned with the marginalised in society, questioning



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the assumption that it provided authority for the institutional Church.

Fontbonne provides a rich survey of the foundation of confraternities of the Holy Spirit during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. He has particularly close investigation of such communities in the Forez and elsewhere (with detailed maps identifying their location in an appendix). Whether such associations sought to challenge clerical authority can be much debated. What is clear from his account, however, is that they provided an opportunity for lay involvement alongside clerical and religious associations. His documentation of a gradual decline in such foundations may indicate not so much a decline in lay spirituality as the demise of an institutional structure that co-existed alongside other clerical and religious communities. There are further questions that could be asked. What opportunities were there for lay women to invoke the authority of the Holy Spirit? Were confraternities of the Holy Spirit further opportunities for a male urban elite to assert their authority against female communities of beguines or other dissident women? Fontbonne's study implicitly raises many important questions, even if more could be asked. In daring to cross conventional disciplinary boundaries between historical theology and social history, this volume is to be much commended.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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