

Reviews

Albini, Giuliana. *Carità e governo delle povertà (secoli XI–XV)*. Milano: Unicopli, 2002. 357 pp. ISBN 88–400–0824–1 Euros 19,00

In the flourishing of studies about charity and charitable institutions in medieval and early modern Italy, Giuliana Albini's volume finds its own place by describing an important social reality such as Milanese charitable institutions from Bonvesin de la Riva (1240–1315 ca) to the founding of the "Monti di Pietà" in the late 1400s.

Her volume is divided in two parts preceded by an interesting introduction that shapes and outlines the field of research. The author gives an overview of the state of charitable institutions in early modern Milan (but also Italy), and points to the most relevant studies in this field. An important turning point in approaching this subject is to establish where 'charity' ends and 'self-help' starts (the contemporary term "self-help" is adopted by Albini), which implies a sort of an *antelitteram* charitable system/Welfare. As the author points out, "in light of the evolution of modern/contemporary times, with the progressive attribution to civic institutions (but earlier to ecclesiastical institutions more or less heavily controlled by the State) of material responsibilities for assistance of the poor or the sick (up to the creation of Welfare), the Middle Ages appear to be a type of extended prelude in which private charity fills in for public disinterest. In this manner, the couplet charity/private is substituted by a chronological and qualitative progression to the couplet welfare/public; or, better still, to the triplet welfare/public/private." (p. 10, my translation).

But, as the author immediately adds that: "although an interpretation of this kind might offer the certain vantage of letting us trace the prevailing lines of development in this long period of time, it does not, however, take into consideration the complexity of this evolution, which was not (and is not) at all linear, and which must not be perceived as a necessary development and solution to the problems of poverty. It is clear to everyone how, in contemporary society, the debate on the "social state" is one of the most sensitive points of political and social life, defended and attacked, but whose origins and history are also very little known. Medieval Italian cities produced, in this as in many other areas, new 'experiments' in institutional and social life; knowing this history and these experiments may, perhaps, be of help in understanding better the current debate on these topics." (pp. 10–11).

If we consider the first assumption, then more prudently redefined by Albini, we should have to conclude that contemporary American society, from the point of view of hospitals and charitable services, is based on a Medieval system (according to Vera Zamagni's *Povertà e innovazioni istituzionali in Italia. Dal Medioevo ad oggi*, quoted in Albini 10); and by consequence Europe appears as a laboratory of social 'experiments' of higher quality. We do not know if this is a valid conclusion or just a suggestion, nevertheless Albini links the importance of her study also to a contemporary issue such as hospital services and poverty in Western countries.

This perspective also implies, and in a certain sense proclaims, the importance of Humanities in current life, and this, in turn, implies a reflection on the role of the intellectual in modern society.

The volume presents two important moments of the Milanese way in providing social services: the first part focuses on the state of the social assistance (lay/religious) before the institution of the “Monte di Pietà” and the fifteenth-century hospitals. One should point out the interesting analysis of the role of intellectuals such as Bonvesin de la Riva in the thirteenth-century Milanese life (“Bonvesin da la Riva, un intellettuale laico alla ricerca di una dimensione religiosa nella Milano di fine Duecento”), the descriptions of the lives of merchants of Milan who were involved in social activities (“Vite di mercanti milanesi del Trecento e del Quattrocento affari e carità”). The study also offers a clear description of the Medieval attitude towards health, body, soul, pandemics; together with an effective description of monastic, first, and lay/religious institutions, second, devoted to health and to assistance to the poor (“Tra anima e corpo: modi e luoghi di cura nel Medioevo”; “Ospedali e cibo in età medievale”). The last part of the book is concentrated on a re-analysis of the historical importance of the reform of Milan’s hospitals in the 1400s that ends with the founding of the Monte di Pietà, strongly supported by preachers such as Bernardino da Siena and other friars.

Albini’s study makes an important contribution to the study of charitable institutions in Medieval Italy (most of all in Milan and other selected areas of Northern Italy), and highlights an interesting historical/critic link between the Medieval hospital system and the contemporary Welfare problems in Western countries.

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Cinquecento anni di Misericordia, ed. Paolo Vitali, text and transcriptions by Fabrizio Mari. Pescia: Edizioni Vannini, 2006. 190 pp. b/w illustrations.

This short, but captivating volume provides an introduction to the history of the confraternity of mercy in the Tuscan town of Pescia, on the Apennine foothills north-west of Florence. Founded in 1506 in the wake of a Marian miracle at the local Franciscan church, the confraternity quickly grew and prospered, easily thriving until the grand-ducal suppressions of 1784. After a sixty-years hiatus, it was re-founded in 1842 and continues to this day to offer a devotional and charitable venue to the people of Pescia.

The majority of the volume consists of a “historical survey” by Fabrizio Mari and his transcription of several important documents related to the confraternity. In the first chapter of his “Excursus storico” Mari details the origins of the confraternity (pp. 15–23). A week after a statue of the Virgin in the church of St. Francis in Pescia had begun to show “certain miraculous signs” (13 April 1506), a group of local men gathered to found a confraternity in her honour, but also (these are Tuscans, after