

Reviews

Cossar, Roisin. *The Transformation of the Laity in Bergamo 1265–c.1400*. The Medieval Mediterranean Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400–1500, vol. 63. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006. xvi, 228 pp. ISBN 90-04-15222-9 EUR 89, US\$ 116.

This volume challenges the view that confraternities helped medieval and renaissance people overcome the social distinctions inherent in their society and helped them partake of a “ritual brotherhood” (to use Ronald Weissman’s term) that brought together rich and poor, male and female. Claiming that this is an overly simplistic view, Roisin Cossar points out, instead, that confraternities and other pious institutions established by the laity in late medieval Europe “reflected and reinforced the social structure of the community” (p. 3). One need not be a cynic to agree with this statement, just a cultural realist. What is more interesting, however, in Cossar’s thesis is that she sees a “growing elitism” developing in religious organizations (including not only parishes, dioceses and lay confraternities, but also hospitals) whereby “lay religious culture was increasingly dominated by the values and life experiences of wealthy men” (p. 3). In so doing, Cossar is echoing in part Weissman’s thesis of the *nobilizzazione* of confraternities, argued explicitly in his final chapter on “The Courtiers of God” from his book *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1982). Cossar, however, takes this view farther (or, should I say, anticipates it) by applying it to a much earlier time period and to a context away from a centre of power. Weissman had seen it happening in the confraternities of sixteenth-century ducal Florence, while Cossar sees it active already in confraternities in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Bergamo, a town in the political periphery – Bergamo, which lies in the Alpine foothills, was a border city both while it was part of the Duchy of Milan (1264–1428) and then again while it belonged to the Republic of Venice (1428–1797). Cossar’s analysis may thus be used to argue for the ever-presence of this process of *nobilizzazione* or of the “growing elitism” that is inevitable (and here I am being a cynic) in every human institution, regardless of the change from republican to princely government (as in the case of Florence) or of the growing prosperity and influence of the bourgeoisie (as in the case of Bergamo).

The book is divided into three sections. The first describes the development of confraternities (chapt. 1) and hospitals (chapt. 2) in Bergamo. The second focuses on confraternal charity (chapt. 3) and the Church (chapt. 4). The last section (chapt. 5) moves away from institutions to listen, instead, to the individual voices that can be heard in fourteenth-century wills and testaments. There is, therefore, a progression from institutional to private voices, from group charity to personal bequests. Not surprisingly, as the focus shifts from the corporate to the particular we begin to hear individual voices, and especially those of women and of the not-so-wealthy,

“negotiating” a space and a role for themselves in the larger spiritual economy of their city.

In her chapter on confraternities (chapt. 1), Cossar describes the establishment of lay religious organizations in Bergamo, their statutes, their membership (men and women, rich and poor), and their activities. Without ignoring other sodalities, she does however focus extensively on the *Misericordia Maggiore* (or MIA), the largest and most influential confraternity in the city. In discussing hospitals (chapt. 2), Cossar moves from a description of their foundation and their activities to a fascinating examination of the place and role of women in their administration and organization. She concludes that the growing professionalization of these institutions as centres of medical care gradually undermined women’s influence in their administration and operation – something that foreshadows the growing exclusion of women from the practice of medicine in early modern Europe evidenced in the sixteenth century tension between university trained male doctors and female medical practitioners or “wise women.” In chapter three Cossar examines the charitable side of confraternity life, analyzing the identities of both the donors to confraternities and the recipients of confraternity assistance. She identifies a growing gap between confraternities and their “clients”, pointing out in particular that the so-called “shamed-faced poor” were much more adept at asking for, and much more successful in receiving, assistance from confraternities. In other words, the institution sought to help everybody, but the higher classes received better service. Such better service was evident also in the laity’s relationship with the Church (Chapt. 4). Here, Cossar observes that wealthy males were able to resist the clergy’s attempt to control the life of the laity and were even able to develop a special relationship with their local clergy to the point of being able to present themselves “as partners with clerics in their spiritual journey” (p. 141). What held true for wealthy men did not, however, hold true for poor men or for women, though the latter were able to make their voices heard (ever so slightly) through their testamentary and inter-vivos donations. And this brings us to the final section (chapt. 5), where Cossar moves away from institutions to listen to individual voices, and especially to those of women. Not surprisingly, a multiplicity of voices and concerns greets the attentive ear, drawing attention to similarities and differences in the ways men and women articulated their pious intentions.

This extensive study of confraternal, charitable, and spiritual life in late-medieval Bergamo follows a variety of approaches – institutional, social, and even gendered. It offers the reader an in-depth, but also a wide-ranging approach to lay piety and lay spiritual/social concerns in an average northern-Italian town at a distance from the political or economic centres of power. As such, it is a fine example of spiritual life and social/charitable concerns in the periphery of a late-medieval state.

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