Review Essay: Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought*

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attempts of Christians to find points of commonality with Roman thought. She also treats such varied topics as Christian support of the Roman emperor through prayer, the organization of the early Church on the model of the Roman collegia, and public opinion as a moving force behind the persecution of Christians.

The principal strength of The Christians and the Roman Empire is its inclusion of extensive bibliographic references. References permeate the main body of the text and are complemented by extensive endnotes for each chapter. The breadth of the primary source material upon which Sordi draws is impressive. Her essays bring together biblical texts, apocryphal writings, the works of the Fathers of the Church, and secular, political documents. The secondary sources mentioned span the range of French, German, Italian, and English scholarship. Because of its bibliographic wealth, one can turn to Sordi’s book as a point of departure for more intensive research into the issues she broaches. On the other hand, a distinct limitation of this monograph is Sordi’s failure to extend her study through the fall of the Roman Empire and Augustine’s City of God, a classic record of the tensions between Christianity and Roman civilization.

For the most part, The Christians and the Roman Empire is a work to be appreciated by graduate students and scholars in the field of Church history. It is not a book that reads easily, due to the density and compactness of the content. The frequent use of untranslated Latin and Greek phraseology as well as extended textual citation in Latin also serve to restrict its audience.

The one exception is the very first chapter, which deals with varying interpretations of the trial of Christ. Sordi here displays the historian going through the paces of reconstructing a historical event through critical assessment of primary sources. This chapter might profitably be assigned to undergraduates as an illustration of the methodology of historical inquiry.

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The twelfth century was one of the most innovative periods in Western Europe’s history. Abbot Joachim found a new way of seeing both the past and the future. His notion of organically linked status, developing progressively toward a future sabbath, was a true invention, one with a long and important future.
Bernard McGinn has done research on Joachim for many years. *The Calabrian Abbot* incorporates several previously published articles, but these have been extensively revised not only in order to bring them up to date but also to fit them into a coherent study, the aim of which is to determine the place of Joachim in Western thought.

The introduction places Joachim in the context of the Norman kingdom of Southern Italy and Sicily and of the history of the papacy, especially of the popes from Lucius III through Celestine III, all of whom had dealings with the abbot. McGinn suggests that Joachim’s career was modeled on that of the eleventh-century *Wanderprediger*, such as Nilus or Bruno, combined with the influence of the Cistercians, especially St. Bernard.

Sketching Joachim’s life, McGinn argues that the vision on Mt. Tabor, mentioned in the anonymous *Vita*, is legendary. He follows Marjorie Reeves when he asserts that the Easter vision took place before the Pentecost vision, and like Robert Lerner, McGinn believes that both visions occurred in the same year while Joachim was at Casamari. McGinn suggests that the year was 1183 (21-22). He believes that the author of the *Vita* confuses Joachim’s visit to Pope Lucius (1184) with his visit to Pope Urban III (1186), when the arrival of the messenger announcing the fall of Jerusalem would have been more likely. The brief survey of Joachim’s works argues that the *Liber figurarum* is basically authentic (36). Like Reeves, McGinn believes that *figurae* are the best introduction to Joachim’s thought.

Chapter One is a brief and current summary of the history of apocalyptic eschatology down to the twelfth century, emphasizing the period before A.D. 450 and the influence of St. Augustine. Chapter Two reviews the history of exegesis of the Apocalypse of John, likewise focusing on the influence of Tyconius and Augustine. McGinn deliberately avoids discussing Joachim’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries such as Anselm of Havelberg, contending that they did not influence Joachim (68). The author tends to place Joachim into a theological tradition more than to see him from the historical perspective of the High Middle Ages.

“Joachim the Symbolist” is crucial. McGinn defines symbols as images [which] contain dual levels of meaning: literal… meanings and dynamic, open ones which put man in contact with dimensions of reality… incapable of being fully communicated in conceptual and discursive fashion.

Thus Joachim belongs in a tradition of thinkers who are fundamentally symbolists and in contrast to those theologians whose patterns of thought are discursive, e.g., Peter Lombard. *Figurae* are symbols and McGinn
interprets Joachim’s figures from the perspective of previous apocalyptic symbolic patterns.

The chapter on exegesis is done with great care. McGinn asks “whether or not Joachim compromised the centrality of Christ” and replies that “the best answer is yes and no—or perhaps, yes, but not as usually claimed by the critics” (137). Joachim believed that the sending of the Holy Spirit was necessary to complete the coming of the Son; however, the Holy Spirit was sent by Christ, not in opposition to him. The double procession is central to Joachim’s theology of history.

Chapter Five summarizes Joachim’s Expositio in Apocalypsim, because the Expositio stood at the center of Joachim’s planned commentary on Scripture, and in it Joachim elaborated “a major theology of history, one comparable in scope and system with Augustine’s De civitate Dei” (157). E. K. Burger’s edition of the Enchiridion super Apocalypsim (Toronto, 1986), in which the previously unpublished Pavia version of the Liber introductorius is edited, appeared too late to be used.

McGinn’s study of the Trinity in history focuses on Joachim’s understanding of the Trinity more than on his patterns of history. McGinn points again to the importance of the double procession, that two are sent by one and that one proceeds from two, the first symbolized in the prima diffinitio (alpha) and the latter in the secunda, symbolized by the lower case omega. The significance of Joachim’s symbolist approach is underlined in contrast to the discursive conceptualizing of Lombard and the Schoolmen.

Rather than a survey of the history of Joachitism, the final chapter contrasts the attitudes of St. Thomas Aquinas and of St. Bonaventura with Joachim’s theology of history. Aquinas’s criticism comes from the standpoint of a discursive approach, while Bonaventura, albeit scholastically trained, was himself a symbolist. The Franciscan doctor could, therefore, adapt Joachim’s theology of history while carefully avoiding its more radical features.

Marjorie Reeves published Joachim of Fiore in 1976. Delno West and Sandra Zimdars-Swartz brought out Joachim of Fiore in 1983. McGinn’s is also an introduction to Joachim and Joachitism. The similarities between the books indicate the formation of a new consensus on at least some aspects of Joachim’s thought. Duplication is rare in these books, and the degree to which they complement each other requires that all three be read.

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