

## sehепunkte 23 (2023), Nr. 2

### Silvia Negri (ed.): Representations of Humility and the Humble

In the Christian tradition the virtue of humility is quite often considered the foundation of all other virtues, as the twelfth-century Cistercian monk Bernard of Clairvaux claimed in his Sermon on the Nativity of the Lord: *Studete humilitati, quae fundamentum est custosque virtutum* (Cultivate humility which is the foundation and guardian of the virtues) [PL, 183, 115]. Do all Christian authors agree with this statement? This book shows that throughout history - especially the Middle Ages and Renaissance - the virtue of humility had many diverse meanings depending on the background and religious/social context of the writers who attempted to define what humility meant to them and their readers.

This volume presents twelve studies on the virtue of humility as it appeared in various works of the medieval and early Renaissance periods, along with two essays that focus on several writings of the eighteenth century: German university moral instructions for students (1700) and the philosophical work of David Hume (1711-1776).

Silvia Negri - the editor - provides an excellent introduction to these essays and a presentation of the complexities of dealing with humility throughout history. The volume also provides a brief abstract after each article, a bibliography, an index of persons/place names, and a concise index of manuscripts that were the main sources for the articles.

Negri states that these essays "offer some reflections on how and to what extent humility representations were the place in which pre-modern actors expressed and/or claimed what they considered their own moral, cultural, or religious identity - highlighting, in other words, how processes of identity construction mobilized more or less codified topoi and judgements of humility" (XVII). The context of how humility was approached is significant for each of these writings. For example, Delphine Conzelmann writes on how the theme of humility appears in the scholastic/monastic dispute of the twelfth century Cistercian William of St. Thierry against the secular master Peter Abelard. She says that the issue of humility arises when engaging in theology, specifically Abelard's "theology of pride." The main issue is the condemnation of Abelard's scholastic methodology and "intellectual curiosity as a source of spiritual knowledge" (23). The main sources considered are primarily William's Romans commentary and his *Disputatio adversus Petrum Abaelardum*.

Pietro Maranesi's essay shows how Francis of Assisi viewed humility through an evangelical approach, which stands in contrast to the more monastic approach of the later Franciscan scholar, Bonaventure. The article also gives the reader an excellent introduction to humility in the Rule of Benedict and how this monastic treatment compares with both Francis and Bonaventure.

Irene Zavattero's essay presents the early fourteenth-century debate about humility in the theological responses to the recent discovery of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, especially in the theological writings of the Franciscan theologian Gerald Odonis.

Nikolaus Egel's essay focuses on the Renaissance period in which Giovanni Pico, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, and Girolamo Savonarola are considered to be originators of modern religious skepticism - and not the later skeptics themselves- as they desired "to strengthen faith and establish a firm certainty in the spirit of humility and Christian apologetics" in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (252).

We have essays on specific medieval authors who presented their own perspective on the theme of humility. This is particularly noted in the essay by Nadia Bray who writes about the fourteenth-century Dominican Meister Eckhart and his transformation of Thomas Aquinas' attempt to reconcile magnanimity and humility. In the essay by Segri Sancho Fibla we are introduced to Marguerite Porete, the early fourteenth-century Beguine, who wrote her *Mirouer des simples ames* that uses the imagery of trees as way to map out the soul's journey

to the ultimate aim of the deification of the soul, which came about by overcoming the virtue of humility. Isabel Iribarren examines the fifteenth-century theologian Jean Gerson, who presents three different meanings of humility in his writings. The first is "a moral meaning, according to which humility is conceived as a voluntary submission to a higher will resulting from a sense of one's own meekness." The second is "a theological meaning, where humility appears as a token of true revelation." Third is "a spiritual meaning, according to which, humility is the key virtue leading to contemplation" (234).

The volume concludes with an essay by Dan O'Brien on the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, who in his writings takes a negative attitude toward the traditional attitudes toward humility. Hume makes the distinction between "epistemically vicious forms of intellectual humility, those which Hume ascribes to religious thinkers, and virtuous forms of intellectual modesty, those which are a feature of Hume's mitigated skepticism" (274).

The virtue of humility appears in the context of the practical life of groups and individuals, as we see in a few of these essays. Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli treats female head/body coverings as signs of modesty and subordination in the later Middle Ages. Carla Casagrande's essay focuses on how humility was treated in the late thirteenth-century mendicant tradition (from an anonymous Franciscan text and Thomas Aquinas) regarding the interior and external dimensions of humility. These dimensions were not only for all Christians but also prelates who were called to be humble interiorly but also had positions of authority in which they were to be regarded as representatives of God in their ministry.

The essay written by Anne Por and Herman Paul presents the instructions on humility and modesty for students who were going to enter into the service of the civil court in Halle, Germany, around the year 1700. The study of Annette Kehnel looks at the world of art and its presentation of humility as represented by the symbol of the lamb (Agnus Dei), which served for the social functioning of medieval society and had modern implications for the cognitive sciences.

Representations of Humility and the Humble is a commendable introduction to the complexity of meanings of humility in the Christian tradition in history. We are exposed to the thought of individuals and groups of authors that show us how humility was viewed in theology, literature, art, and social customs. Like the other virtues - such as faith, charity, and hope -, manifold meanings emerge based on the context and attitudes of the authors. It is a welcome addition to other contemporary studies that focus on the virtue of humility and its manifold meanings in the past that can illuminate what possible meanings it can have for Christians and others living in the modern world.

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