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Robert L. J. Shaw, *The Celestine Monks of France, c. 1350-1450. Observant Reform in an Age of Schism, Council, and War*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 294 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, and index. \$106.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-9462986787.

Review by James D. Mixson, University of Alabama.

Sometime around 1240, a Benedictine monk named Peter, later known as Peter of Morrone, set out from his community of Santa Maria di Faifoli near Benevento to live as a hermit in the mountains of Abruzzo. His rigorous asceticism attracted a crowd of followers, and their early communities of hermits were eventually approved as a congregation within the Order of St. Benedict. The pious hermit Peter was himself then elected Pope as Celestine V in 1294, but held office only briefly before voluntarily abdicating—for centuries, the last pope to have done so until the resignation of Benedict XVI in 2013. Peter was in turn canonized in 1313, and his followers continued to imitate his way of life. The Celestines, as these Benedictine monks came to be called, soon grew to some 35 houses by 1300 and some one hundred a century later, first across Italy, and then in France.

The historiography of religious life and its orders, as Kaspar Elm noted long ago, remains in some ways at the mercy of the orders' own successes. Cluniacs, Cistercians, Franciscans, Dominicans, and other well-established orders can boast of rich historiographies reaching back to the Middle Ages, their modern scholarship, in many instances, still supported by longstanding traditions of research, edition, and publication. Conversely, the absence of any such tradition also shapes the stories we (don't) tell and the sources we (don't) read. Viable modern accounts of failed, forgotten, or otherwise marginal orders—the Williamites, for example, studied by Elm, or the Carmelites and “other friars” studied by Francis Andrews—remain harder to see or to access.[1] So, too, for the study of groups like the French wing of the Celestines in the later Middle Ages—in this case a late, regional inflection of an older Italian Benedictine reform long since faded from existence and with no significant independent historiographical tradition. Apart from a scattering of essays and articles on isolated aspects of the congregation's history, only a 2006 *Habilitationschrift* by Karl Borchardt offers anything like a full modern account of the Celestine story.[2]

Robert Shaw's book is another effort to recover this neglected Benedictine congregation from oblivion. Its focus is on the seventeen foundations that formed the French wing of the Celestine tradition during its height, from the mid-fourteenth through the mid-fifteenth century. Shaw's overall concern is to place the internal, institutional history of these reforming houses in dialogue with the world beyond; it is to trace “how reform both drew from and shaped its own sociocultural

landscape” (p. 20), and to cast the story of reform more fully as an “ongoing conversation between monastic reform and external society” (p. 24).

The book’s structure reflects this thematic emphasis. A first part, in three chapters, discusses “the French Celestines in their world.” It begins with a contextualization and close reading of the Vita of the French Celestines’ most consequential fifteenth-century figure, Jean Bassand, a five-time Celestine prior whose renown made him a candidate for canonization. In the text, Shaw discerns an unmistakable tension characteristic of most fifteenth-century reform movements, an “ambivalence between the unremitting enforcement of discipline and more affectionate and irenic tones” (p. 60). Chapter two traces the constitutional and normative framework as it developed in France from the later fourteenth century on, building on Italian precedents but also emphasizing (in ways that reflected a wider fifteenth-century moment) the strictures of regular observance. Celestine statutes were stern and scrupulous, suspicious of the powers of officeholders, and reflective ultimately of what Shaw calls a certain “urban extremism” (p. 88): strict observance of law and statute protected the Celestines in their effort to carve out deserts in the French urban environments in which they found themselves. A third chapter turns to the challenges of putting those constitutions into practice. Acknowledging the reality of an all-too-often thin source base for such inquiries, Shaw turns to the evidence of a key narrative source, the Chronicle of Metz, as well as a series of “Quodlibets,” or disputed questions on matters of observance posed by the Celestines of Paris just before 1400.

A second part, in two longer chapters, discusses “the world of the French Celestines.” Chapter four discusses dynamics of foundation, patronage, and material maintenance, its evidence drawn from charters of foundation and donation, obituaries, and documents related to anniversary masses. In an era of rising costs and other economic pressures, growth came almost exclusively through elite patronage: of the seventeen foundations studied here, Shaw notes that eleven were made by kings and princes, popes or cardinals. Celestine houses were also small—many had fewer than 12 members—but still had to meet a range of financial, liturgical, and pastoral tasks, most notably ever-growing and increasingly burdensome rounds of anniversary masses. A final chapter turns to the ways in which French Celestines reflected and shaped the world beyond their ranks, here described as a cultural outreach with two main dimensions. First, and most visibly, the Celestines stood in a powerfully symbiotic relationship with their royal and noble patrons. To found or patronize a strict and humble Celestine house was an act of both piety and of public symbolism and propaganda. The Celestines also engaged in what Shaw calls “doctrinal outreach” (p. 236) recruiting new members from the ranks of artisans and burghers, and serving as spiritual directors for lay elites, most notably Peter of Luxembourg (d. 1387) and (with a certain reluctance, it seems) his visionary follower, Marie Robine. Works like Pierre Pocquet’s *Orationarium*—a collection of prayers that survives in 19 manuscripts—as well as the congregation’s ties to Gerson further ground the argument that Celestine influence should not be overlooked in our stories of late medieval French society and politics. Three useful appendices appear at the end of the book.^[3] There is, however (and frustratingly for a book with such comparative potential) no proper bibliography or collection of works cited.

Shaw’s study takes its place alongside Borckhardt’s monograph as one of the few modern scholarly studies of the followers of Peter of Morrone. The books overlap in some respects, but are also different in significant ways. Borckhardt’s evidence and analysis are of broader scope, covering the origins and expansion of the order in both Italy and France, reaching chronologically into the early modern period and thematically into questions of daily life,

patterns of property-holding, and the social origins of the congregation's members. Borckhardt also provided a series of updated critical editions of bulls and other key constitutional texts. For these reasons, his monograph remains an indispensable starting point. But Shaw's work is a welcome and useful complement, valuable in several respects. Apart from being the first sustained study on its topic in English, the book is useful for its effort to blend institutional and cultural history, its focus on lived experience and moral ambiguities of observance and, above all, its attempt at a more nuanced and balanced picture of an order shaped by the distinct challenges of the later Middle Ages. Here the old dramatizations of waning and crisis are set aside, while generalizations about "an age of schism, council, and war," too often vague and overused, appear appropriately grounded in the specifics of contemporary realities of culture and politics.[4]

Shaw's reading of a Celestine history in a way that moves back and forth across institutional boundaries is also helpful and reflects a longstanding effort to link the later medieval orders to the world beyond the cloister. Within the French Celestine ranks, Shaw helpfully corrects a tendency to see their distinct Observant fusion of law and spirituality as a harsh and legalistic betrayal of twelfth- and thirteenth-century spirituality. Rather, he discerns in the reformers' commitment to law and statute an attempted balance, often becoming a tension, between moral rigor and strictness on the one hand, moderation and charity on the other.[5] With regard to the Celestines' relations with the wider world, Shaw rightly outlines how dynamics of foundation and patronage, however much they might have been an expression of personal piety, were inseparable from matters of politics, symbolism, and a certain degree of cultural fashion. The foundation of houses like Saint Antoine in Amiens, for example, helped Charles VI project stability and majesty amid the uncertainties fostered by his bouts of illness, while the Celestine house in Avignon served as a complex site for negotiating tensions over the *via cessionis*. Lancastrians and Burgundians, too, sought to establish Celestine ties on both sides of the channel—Henry V at Sheen, Bedford and later Henry VI in Rouen—in ways that at once expressed royal piety, majesty, and legitimacy. These same moves also captured contemporary spiritual fashion (above all, as a complement to English patronage of the Carthusians and Brigittines), and shrewdly served cross-channel diplomatic interests.

Overall, this book is an important contribution to the study of Observant reform, especially as a case study that cogently highlights the diversity that characterized reform's many inflections. The forgotten story of the French Celestines is recovered here in a way that establishes much common ground with other contemporary movements—the urban embrace of solitude and asceticism among the Carthusians, for example, and the scrupulosity and piety of the circles of Windesheim and Melk. But the study also highlights what made the French Celestine story distinct, not least its close ties to royal and princely founders, and especially its rapid growth by way of founding new houses rather than reforming old ones. As so many of the Celestine's reforming contemporaries remarked, it was easier to found new houses than to hack through thickets of overgrown custom and entrenched resistance when trying to reform old ones. The French Celestines took the advice to heart, and the result was a smaller, more nimble network whose distinct brand of fierce asceticism had an influence was, at least for a time, far greater than the network's modest legacy might suggest. Thanks to Shaw's book, that influence is more visible and accessible than before, as is the challenge of recovering religious life's many neglected late-medieval stories.

NOTES

[1] Kaspar Elm, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Wilhelmitenordens* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1962); Francis Andrews, *The Other Friars: The Carmelite, Augustinian, Sack and Pied Friars in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006).

[2] Karl Borchart, *Die Cölestiner. Ein Mönchsgemeinschaft des späteren Mittelalters* (Husum: Mathiesen, 2006).

[3] The first provides lists of French Celestine provincial priors 1380-1450, as well as a map of the Celestine houses under study. A second and third presents tables documenting attempts to reduce the burdens of foundation masses at the Celestine houses of Paris and Sens.

[4] Howard Kaminsky, "From Lateness to Waning to Crisis. The Burden of the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Early Modern History* 4(2000): 85–125.

[5] In this respect, his analysis complements the work of Gert Melville and others, who have come to see late-medieval institutionalism as the guarantor of founding charisma, and an embrace of law, tempered by charity and discretion, as essential to the long-term success of religious life's ideals. See for example the foundational essay collection edited by Gert Melville, *Institutionen und Geschichte. Theoretische Aspekte und mittelalterliche Befunde* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1992).

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