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Lesley Smith, *Fragments of a World: William of Auvergne and his Medieval Life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023. xii + 281 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780226826189; \$44.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780226826196.

Review by Adam J. Davis, Denison University.

It is surprising how few biographies of medieval bishops have been written. The career of a bishop opens a window into many dimensions of the medieval church, including the implementation of (and resistance to) reforms, the secular clergy's relationship with various religious orders, the interplay between the clergy and lay parishioners, the power dynamic between elites and non-elites, and the relationship between local church leaders and temporal rulers of a region. Yet even the life of a medieval bishop as prolific as William of Auvergne, who served as bishop of Paris from 1228 until his death in 1249, is challenging to write. In writing William's biography, Lesley Smith found that so much was unknown about William's life that it was next to impossible to write a traditional linear narrative. As a result, she chose to explore William's theology and worldview through a thematic lens, using the sources that remain accessible to us to provide "fragments of a world." The resulting book provides an absorbing and illuminating portrait of a heretofore little-known bishop.

As it happens, there are unusually rich sources for reconstructing William's voice. Most notable are almost 600 of his sermons that have survived, recently edited by Franco Morenzoni.<sup>[1]</sup> Unlike model sermon collections that provide universal talking points for preachers, William's surviving sermons represented his "own notes for himself...on what he wanted to say" (p. 9). They include his ruminations on a wide range of topics, including death, family, marriage, women, prostitution, poverty, wealth, charity, illness, Jews, animals, and food and drink. In addition, William produced a substantial body of theological writings (much of it edited) both during his time as a teaching master at the cathedral school in Paris and during his more than twenty years as bishop. It was during this latter period that he produced his voluminous, seven-part *Magisterium divinale et sapientiale* ("Teaching on God in the Mode of Wisdom"), which combined the technical points of theology with his own everyday observations about the human experience. Smith's principal interest is in uncovering William, "a fellow human being," "more than a theology with a name attached" (p. 13). Guided by this objective, she principally turns to the bishop's richly colorful sermons.

Although William spent most of his career in Paris, he came from Auvergne, in the south of France. Nothing is known about William's life before the first recorded mention of him in Paris in 1223. While William had served as a canon at Notre Dame in Paris and had been a teaching

master at the cathedral school during the 1220s, he was not ordained a priest until right before becoming bishop in 1228. Growing up in the Midi, speaking a local dialect of Occitan, would have been quite a different experience from the latter part of his life spent in the north of France among the rarefied circles of intellectuals, church leaders, and members of the French royal court.

As his theological works make clear, William of Auvergne was remarkably well read, not only in the usual litany of classical and Christian authorities but also in contemporary Arab and Jewish authors, particularly those most influenced by Aristotle both in their language and in their commitment to making strictly reason-based arguments about God. Indeed, as Smith shows, in referring to God as “the First,” William was influenced by the Arab (and Aristotelian) scholar, Avicenna. Smith also suggests that William may have been the first Western theologian to cite arguments made by Maimonides. Here, she casts William as “unusual, if not unique,” in having turned to a Jewish source to make “a serious attempt to get into the mindset of a Jewish interpreter” (p. 106). We should not, however, surmise that William was, therefore, sympathetic to Jews. Moreover, it was during William’s episcopate that the Talmud was essentially put on trial in Paris (1240) and then burned (1242), although the bishop’s precise role in this affair is not clear.

A prolific and talented preacher himself, William’s admiration for the mendicant orders—the Franciscans and Dominicans—is not surprising, particularly given that he chose to address the subject of poverty in his sermons more than any other topic. Interestingly, although William argued that poverty liberated one from worldly concerns and embodied evangelical perfection, he placed greater emphasis on the will or the desire for poverty as opposed to simply a person’s state of poverty. Thus, in his eyes, a poor person who wishes that they were not poor violates the spirit of true poverty. William also defended the value of wealth when used for pious purposes, such as charity, and he also accepted the necessity of laymen spending worldly riches on family members. Like many preachers of the time, including the mendicants, William frequently used the language of commerce and riches in a spiritual context.

Smith’s book vividly underscores one of the most fascinating aspects of William’s thought, namely “his constant use of the everyday as a means of explaining God and faith” (p. 27). The bishop’s sermons reveal his prodigious communication skills, including “his pervasive sense of his audience” (p. 211). Moreover, his preaching brought together high theology with quotidian observations, including, one would presume, his own real-life interactions. William tells the story, for example, of a medieval furry, a man who believed himself to be a chicken. Other sermons refer to the lived experiences of women: menstruation, the pain of childbirth, and nursing, and even women’s practice of plucking their eyebrows and the hair on the back of their necks. One can only wonder about how this celibate bishop (and master of theology) derived his knowledge of women’s lives. Smith draws attention to the bishop’s use of humor in his preaching, his frequent invocation of animals to illustrate moral lessons, his use of food and drink as metaphors, and above all, his view of the natural world as a kind of book written by the Creator, revealing God’s nature. As Smith put it, “William’s remarkable talent is his ability simultaneously to explain Christian belief in terms of the highest sophistication and then most common experience” (p. 201).

As Smith convincingly shows, William also displayed a striking degree of intellectual independence. This is evident not only in his theology and distinctive rhetorical style. When

the masters at the University of Paris went on strike in 1229, William did not support his former colleagues. Rather, he sided with Blanche, the queen regent, with whom he developed a friendship (and for whom he may have later served as confessor), when she sent in armed royal forces to restore order, leading to the deaths of several students. Pope Gregory IX, who had appointed William as bishop, was so angered by William's actions and his seeming defiance of the pope's orders, that he expressed regret for having ever made William bishop.

*Fragments of a World* is unusually accessible for a book about a relatively little-known medieval bishop. It is clearly written with a more general audience in mind. Perhaps as a result, Smith tends to provide less context about her sources. Without consulting the endnotes, the reader, in many cases, is not told the source of William's quotes: Does a quote come from a sermon or a scholastic work? Do we know the audience he was addressing? Can the source be dated from William's time at the university or from his years as bishop? Admittedly, these questions cannot always be answered, but more could have been done to contextualize William's ideas. Additionally, while Smith's focus is on William's ideas, the book would have been enriched by greater consideration of his episcopate and that of other mid-thirteenth-century bishops. A more fully developed discussion of William's commitment to the "care of souls" and how he reorganized his diocese, drawing on episcopal charters, synodal statutes, and the sources from religious houses in the diocese, would have enabled Smith to connect William's ideas and values to his practices as bishop. Finally, whereas many scholastics-turned-bishop ceased writing theological works once they became administrators, William continued to be a prolific writer. Is there any evidence that his pastoral (or administrative) experiences as bishop affected the nature of his intellectual and theological orientation? Did his writing change over time?

Although Smith does not pursue these other dimensions of William's career, her book is valuable in reconstructing William of Auvergne's voice. It is a voice that very much reflects the religious values and norms of a highly educated thirteenth-century northern French churchman (with perhaps hints of his more humble southern French roots). Yet Smith has also provided a remarkable flesh-and-blood portrait that underscores the distinctive timbres of William's voice: his quirky humor, the physicality of his language, his vivid analogies, and his keen observations on moral behavior.

## NOTES

[1] Franco Morenzoni, ed., *Guillelmi Alverni Sermones*, 4 vols., Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 230, 230A, 230B, 230C (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010-13).

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