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Patricia Ranft, *The Theology of Work: Peter Damian and the Medieval Religious Renewal Movement*. The New Middle Ages. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 272 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-4039-6847-0.

Review by Sam Collins, George Mason University.

Patricia Ranft is best known for a series of wide-ranging books on the role of women in the intellectual and religious life of Europe.[1] In her newest work, however, she largely sets aside this broad scope and instead focuses on a single aspect of the thought of the influential theologian and reformer Peter Damian (1007-72). Ranft is interested in what Peter has to say about the idea of work, the ways in which the idea of work fits into his larger theological program, and how his evaluation of work has been with us ever since. In many ways this is an old-fashioned history of doctrine applied to an unfamiliar topic. Political theory, ecclesiology, and high theology have been the staples of scholarly attention for the eleventh century, but few have looked at work—a concept seeming, at first glance, too humble to matter. However novel or traditional her approach, Ranft is surely correct to emphasize the lasting influence of Peter and to lament the relative lack of scholarly attention paid to him, especially among those working in English. Although Peter was a dominant religious and political figure in his time, there is no single good modern overview of Peter and his thought. While Ranft's book does not seek to fill that void, her engaging study underscores just how welcome that book will someday be.

In her examination of the idea of work, Ranft's study has two destinations. The first, more thinly documented for obvious reasons of space and scope, is Marx. Ranft sees Peter and his thinking on the nature of Christian labor as the crucial first step towards the modern commonplace that work is, in and of itself, an unquestioned good. Under her formulation, labor gets its familiar valence as a valued rather than a punitive commodity not from medieval monastic theology in general, but from the changes to traditional monastic theology inaugurated by Peter. This bold idea, more suggestion than assertion, sets the tone for the book; while Ranft often spends her time in close analysis of Peter's language and patterns of thought, her goal is always to chart where and how Peter's ideas persist beyond his lifetime.

Ranft's second destination in this work, more amply documented, is the characteristic formulation of the twelfth-century theologians Honorius Augustodunensis (d. c.1151) and Anselm of Havelberg (d. 1158), who, in their discussion of the orders of society, declared all Christians' paths to salvation to be of equal honor and effectiveness. To paraphrase Honorius, all walks of life—whether priests or monks, rich or poor, soldiers, merchants, or farmers—strive together for the delights of eternity.[2] Ranft wants us to feel just how sharply this differs from an older monastic spirituality, one with its roots at the origins of the monastic project, where the perfection pursued by monks set them fundamentally apart and above the clergy and laity who looked to them for inspiration and intervention.[3] For all her suggestions about Marx in the introduction, the thesis of Ranft's study is that Peter elevates and democratizes the redemptive possibilities of labor, thereby making a clean break with the monastic spirituality of late antiquity and the early middle ages.

After a compressed first chapter in which she catalogs different appearances of the idea of labor in religious discourse from Genesis to Cluny, Ranft opens the book's second section (chapters two through four) by setting Peter into the context of evolving eleventh-century arguments about the proper pursuit of the monastic life. Perhaps counter-intuitively, but effectively, Ranft emphasizes Peter's deep respect for the monasticism of Cluny rather than the more radical rejection of traditional monastic forms that he

explored elsewhere, for example in his *Life of Romuald*. Ranft's purpose here is to show that Peter's thinking about the value of work was grounded in eschatological expectation, and that the form of this expectation derived from his experience of life at Cluny. Working from LeClercq and Hallinger, Ranft emphasizes that the life of a Cluniac monk was designed to remake the world today in anticipation of eternity, to give the shape of the next world to human conduct in this world.[4] As Peter said of his experience at Cluny, "I have, indeed, beheld a paradise" (p. 43). More important for Ranft, however, is that as Peter elaborated what exactly went on in this paradise, he did so by describing the labor of the monks, labor intended both to replicate the life to come and to pave the way for entry into that life. In the formulation of Peter's Letter 113, Cluny is a field plowed by oxen (monks) driven on by the "goad of God's terror" so that they might move forward toward "that which lies ahead." For Peter Cluny was a place of labor done in anticipation of the second coming, or as Ranft puts it, "action in the present for the future" (p. 55).

Thus far Ranft shows us Peter soaking up the dominant monastic theology of his day. In the following two chapters (chapters three and four), however, Ranft turns to a description of the important ways in which Peter took the link between proper monastic conduct and the rewards of eternity and moved it outside the walls of the monastery into the wider world. This is the crux of the book. Ranft casts Peter as a monastic thinker who anticipates developments more usually associated with the leading figures of the twelfth century. R. W. Southern spoke of Anselm and his generation as showing a "greater concentration on man and on human experience as a means of knowing God"; for Ranft, a focus on the labor of monks leads Peter to reconsider the nature of human activity.[5] Peter, according to Ranft, elides the idea of monastic labor with all human labor as part of his thinking through the repercussions of man as created in the image of God. When God made humans in his own image he made them "co-creators" who ought continuously to shape the world in anticipation of the second coming. Ranft presents Peter as moved by the implications of this idea into seeing all human labor, not just monastic labor, as mandated by creation itself. Or as she puts it, "Damian holds that work is not the sole domain of one class, but an obligation of every human. The specific task of each individual varies, but not its intrinsic value...." (p. 77).

Peter amplified this attention to all human labor through his insistence that virtuous activity, mostly preaching and teaching in imitation of the apostles, must take place out in the world, in the cities and towns of Italy and beyond. Peter draws here both on an early iteration of the doctrine of the *vita apostolica*, a doctrine which Ranft rightly notes has a lively future but is not often associated as closely with Peter as it should be. Ranft shows us too how Peter, here touching on the core of his attacks on simony and his calls for clerical celibacy, insisted ever more strongly on a perfect consistency of good doctrine and good conduct among those who would spread the word with those who would hear it. Ranft argues that all of this—Peter's Cluniac eschatology, his sense of labor as a religious duty of all humanity, and his strict thinking about how that labor ought to be done—pushed the idea of work to the center of his calls for a better world.

In the final section (chapters five through eight) of the book Ranft examines the afterlife of this line of thought through short case studies of some of the religious movements of the century or so after Peter. Wisely, Ranft does not try to show consistent or direct textual dependence on the works of Peter among these later reformers, but rather emphasizes the ways in which Peter's line of thinking about the value of work continued to be important and elaborated. Ranft works quickly here in order to address as many different cases as possible. She gives the most likely suspects, the Cistercians and Franciscians, the fullest treatment, but also discusses the meaning of labor to Augustinian Canons, Carthusians, Dominicans, and, where possible, the new female lay religious. The book closes with an epilogue (chapter nine) in which Ranft suggests some of the ways in which Peter's presentation of Christian labor comes up in the economic recovery of post-plague Europe. When Bernardino of Siena (d. 1444) celebrated the virtuous work of the guild of wool merchants in his city, she sees the influence of Peter (p. 201); here, at the end of the book, Ranft is suggesting that while Peter thought only of the theological

benefits of Christian labor, after him labor's status as a Christian good brought with it an increasing economic benefit.

There is certainly much that is daring about this book, and not all will accept Ranft's conclusions. My main concern is that her arguments are not always made as strongly as they might have been. For all her analytical vigor, Ranft subtly undermines her case by a certain imprecision of vocabulary. This is true in the flexibility of her use of "work" itself, but is, to this reader, most frustrating in her decision to use "witness" to describe the core of Peter's thinking on action in the world (especially pp. 56-58). Witness, as Ranft uses it, covers a wide range of activity. Mostly it means that Peter insists on the harmony of action and idea, on a life where practice reveals theory and vice versa. Much of this grows out of an earlier article by Ranft on using the idea of witness as an explanatory tool for discussing the historical development of Christianity, and it is easier to follow her analysis here after having read that article.[6] It is of course correct to say that Peter insisted that exterior conduct be as exemplary as interior motivation, to serve as a model to the world; he deployed much of his reforming thunder in assaults on all forms of spiritual hypocrisy. Ranft, however, wants a devotion to witness to make Peter stand out among his peers and be a distinct contribution to his theology. Surely claims to piety have ever been founded on a harmony of word and deed. This is all the more frustrating in that the various Latin renderings of witness (*testificor*, *testimonium*) are not words Peter himself used much to describe his own activity. Ranft's analysis of how Peter imagined the spiritual life well lived and her hunt for Peter's influence on later calls for virtuous living is generally spot-on, but I cannot help but think her reliance on "witness" as a short way of describing all this frequently blunts otherwise sharp points.

Potential readers should also be reminded that because this book appears as part of the Palgrave series The New Middle Ages, citations from primary sources are rendered in the body of the text in translation and only a Latin word or short phrase is printed in the notes. This can be an inconvenience in a work like this one so devoted to the close exposition of text. Matters are made more difficult in that for a full battery of Peter's works one must have simultaneous access to the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, *Corpus Christianorum*, and *Patrologia Latina*.

NOTES

[1] Patricia Ranft, *Women in Western Intellectual Culture, 600-1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); *A Woman's Way: The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); *Women and Spiritual Equity in Christian Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998); *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996)

[2] Honorius Augustodunensis, PL 172, col. 861.

[3] Ranft, p. 83: "Thus, Honorius...reflected upon the spirituality peculiar to the secular vocations of merchant, soldier, and farmer in the same way past generations of writers had reflected upon monks and nuns....Common people were now told that by doing their menial job, in Chenu's words, 'not only did they thus strive for salvation but by their very lives they adorned the church.' None of this would have been possible had not some thinkers taken a new look at the nature of work itself. This is what Damian did."

[4] Jean LeClercq, *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (London: Burnes and Oates, 1968); K. Hallinger, "The Spiritual Life of Cluny in the Early Days," in Noreen Hunt, ed., *Cluniac Monasticism in the Central Middle Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

[5] R.W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 1:25.

[6] Patricia Ranft, "The Concept of Witness: From its Origin to its Institutionalization" *Revue bénédictine* 102 (1992): 21-45, incorrectly cited in the bibliography.

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