
H-France Review Vol. 2 (July 2002), No. . 53

Christopher M. Bellitto, *Nicolas de Clamanges: Spirituality, Personal Reform and Pastoral Renewal on the Eve of the Reformations*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2001. xii + 146 pp. Bibliography and index. \$44.95 U.S. ISBN 0-8132-0996-X.

Review by Erin L. Jordan, University of Northern Colorado.

In this study, Christopher Bellitto attempts to remedy history's treatment of Nicolas of Clamanges (1363/64-1437), frequently relegated by scholars to the margins of religious reform and even posthumously indicted as a proto-Protestant. Through a careful examination of Clamanges' writings related to spirituality, religious practice, and reform, Bellitto intends to restore Clamanges to the position of prominence he enjoyed during his own lifetime as one of the leading advocates for reform during the tumultuous years of the Schism and as one of the most influential voices of the late medieval church. Bellitto clearly demonstrates that a true appreciation of Clamanges cannot discount his preoccupation with religious reform, despite the humanistic elements present in his work. Furthermore, despite his vehement denunciation of the corruption rampant within the medieval church and his call for change, Clamanges is viewed most accurately, according to the author, not as a predecessor to Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers but as a precursor to the council of Trent.

Clamanges' proximity to events and individuals that dominated the political and religious landscape of the period make him an extremely interesting figure to analyze, and Bellitto provides a much needed assessment of his works based upon the most accurate editions currently available. He presents Clamanges as an integral player in the events surrounding the resolution of the Schism, as well as a visible participant in the politics that threatened to consume the university of Paris during that period. Although often overshadowed by his more visible contemporaries, particularly his mentor at the University of Paris, Pierre d'Ailly, and his peer, Jean Gerson, who eventually rose through the ranks to become chancellor of the University, Clamanges moved within elevated intellectual circles, and eventually distinguished himself enough to be appointed the official *rédacteur* of the University in 1394.

Although Bellitto acknowledges the need for a modern critical edition of the complete works of Clamanges, his discussion of Clamanges is meticulously supported with references to the most recent and reliable editions available, including the epistolary edited by Dario Cecchetti and two volumes of treatises edited by François Bérrier. He also provides citations to the seventeenth-century edition of J. Lydius, critiqued by Bellitto as less reliable due to Lydius' characterization of Clamanges as a proto-Protestant. References to Lydius will prove helpful for readers who only have access to that published edition, however problematic. In his examination of the themes which dominated Clamanges' writings, Bellitto clearly demonstrates Clamanges' prescience, both in his indictment of the various practices that were undermining the church during this period and in his prescription for institutional and personal reform, which would be echoed by the Council of Trent several centuries later.

In part 1 of this impressively succinct study, Bellitto introduces Nicolas Clamanges, providing a brief sketch of his background and early experiences at the University of Paris, as well as a discussion of the historical context within which he rose to prominence. Bellitto portrays Clamanges as caught within a web of competing interests, attempting to maneuver between the University of Paris, the French royal

family, and the papacy. After his appointment to the papal curia in 1397, the difficulty of Clamanges' position was exacerbated when the French monarchy withdrew obedience to Avignon in 1398. Clamanges was assigned the task of deflecting criticism from Benedict XIII, indicted by the disgruntled French royal family for refusing to resign the papacy, despite hints to the contrary prior to his election. Increasingly frustrated by failed attempts to reconcile the monarchy and the papacy, Clamanges voluntarily withdrew into the first of two periods of "active exile." During the first period, which coincided with the French withdrawal of obedience (1398-1403), Clamanges attempted to manipulate affairs from behind the scenes, through letters to individuals whose proximity to events provided a greater possibility of exerting control and effecting change. He continued to attempt to influence events through personal correspondence during the period of his second self-imposed exile, which coincided with the emergence of an open rift between the French royal family and the Avignon papacy, and he witnessed the excommunication of Charles VI in 1408.

One of the most interesting areas of Bellitto's study is his examination of Clamanges' conception of his own role in the events surrounding the schism and church reform. Clamanges believed that his task was to encourage others to act and to provide a reasoned and informed impetus for change via correspondence that offered support, spiritual nourishment and consolation to those in immediate proximity to events (p. 47). In this self-appointed task of directing events from a distance, Clamanges targeted specifically his former colleagues at the University of Paris, Pierre d'Ailly and Jean Gerson. Clamanges states on several occasions that they were more suited than he to effect change because of their prestige and prominence. They were also both active players in the political arena in Paris (pp. 49-51). Although Bellitto seems to accept Clamanges' express sentiments regarding his role in reform at face value, I would suggest the possibility of a slightly more skeptical reading. Clamanges' denial of the extent of his own influence is belied by frequent admonitions to his friends, denouncing their inactivity and reluctance to enter into battle on behalf of church reform (p. 51). In addition, Clamanges' willingness to contact key players in events directly, including Benedict XIII, whose actions required "correction," and the French king Charles VI, whom he "attempted to shame into action" (pp. 52-3), suggests that claims of unworthiness may have actually bordered on false modesty or require alternate interpretations.

Clamanges' claims that d'Ailly and Gerson were more capable of effecting reform and reconciliation because they remained at the center of events leads one to speculate about the "extended illness" that necessitated his removal from the papal curia during this particularly tumultuous time and precipitated his first "active exile," an exile which ended following the decision by the royal family to reinstate obedience in 1403. Clamanges' decision to withdraw from events, preferring to direct others from a distance, is both perplexing and intriguing and would benefit from more consideration than provided here by Bellitto. One cannot help but wonder if the self-effacing statements made by Clamanges accurately conveyed his view of his own limitations, or if they merely served as rhetorical devices, allowing him to galvanize others while remaining safely ensconced in exile, so that he could influence the course of events without jeopardizing his own future. Bellitto suggests the possibility of such ulterior motives but does not develop his suspicions into any in-depth analysis (p.129).

In the second part of the volume, Bellitto addresses the primary themes that Clamanges developed in his writings devoted specifically to religious reform. Clamanges' remedy for the ills which plagued the church targeted individuals at every level within the hierarchy, calling for a personal reform modeled on the precedent established by Christ and the apostles. Clamanges' views were clearly shaped by notions of Christocentric piety that dominated dialogues about spirituality during the late fourteenth century. His views of the *reformatio personalis* were formed under the dual auspices of the *imitatio christi* and *vita apostolica*, so prevalent in the late Middle Ages and influential among clergy and laity alike (p. 63). Bellitto effectively argues that Clamanges attributed much of the current dissension and division within the church to corruption, which pervaded all levels of the church from the top down. Clamanges in particular noted the debilitating effects on pastoral care of greed and ambition and attributed much of

the public's disaffection with the current church to the pervasiveness of absenteeism. Bellitto notes that, despite his emphasis on the role of tribulation alongside his insistence upon the necessity of turning one's gaze inward truly to effect personal reform, Clamanges remains suspiciously silent regarding his own use of multiple benefices, an apparent contradiction that may prove interesting upon further exploration.

As Bellitto traces the evolution of Clamanges' reform program, he notes the differences between Clamanges' conception of reform and the approach advocated by his contemporaries, most notably Gerson. As opposed to Gerson, whose "trickle-down" theory of reform envisioned a process whereby reform at the top (*in capite*) of the church would inevitably permeate all ranks of the hierarchy, from the papacy to the local parish priest, Clamanges advocated personal reform at all levels, simultaneously targeting both the head (*in capite*) and the various members below (*in membris*) (pp. 92-3). Bellitto's examination reveals Clamanges' conviction that personal reform was the ultimate prerequisite for any substantive and lasting reform of the institutional church. Without it, any attempts to eradicate corruption were doomed to failure. Bellitto also addresses Clamanges' views on the necessity of educational reform and his support for providing adequate instruction for priests, an essential component of pastoral reform (p. 115). Bellitto suggests that Clamanges' emphasis on the connection between education and pastoral reform were later mirrored in legislation promulgated by Trent, which attempted to implement an elaborate system of seminaries designed to provide extensive education for local parish priests.

Bellitto's analysis, as intended, focuses nearly exclusively on Clamanges' letters and treatises explicitly addressing religious reform, leading to the exclusion of other dimensions that could have contributed to the author's attempts to reveal Clamanges the man. In particular, for the reader less familiar with the range of Clamanges' works, Bellitto's references to his correspondence with some of the most dominant rulers of Europe as well as his attempts to secure powerful patrons outside of the papal curia provide a tantalizing glimpse of the more political side of Clamanges (p. 130). To what extent is it possible to separate the religious and the political, elements inextricably intertwined not only in Clamanges' personal experience and conception of reform, but in medieval society more generally? After all, it is clear that Clamanges was intensely aware of the contradiction inherent in the medieval marriage of politics and religion, which he himself identifies as the primary source of so many of the problems faced by the church during this period of schism and religious upheaval. It would be interesting to assess the implications of this relationship in Clamanges' own life by analyzing together both the political and religious aspects of his character. While not affecting the reader's assessment of Clamanges' contributions to religious reform, Bellitto's omission of this aspect of Clamanges' experience tends to perpetuate the tendency to view him through a one-dimensional historical lens, either as a politically-motivated early humanist or as a religious reformer.

Ultimately, Bellitto makes an undeniably important contribution to our understanding of the complexities of the late Middle Ages by restoring Clamanges to the discussion of religious reform that pervaded this pivotal period in the history of the church. As an individual who was personally involved in and affected by the developments which dominated these pivotal centuries preceding the Reformation, Nicolas de Clamanges was ideally positioned to shape the papacy's response to external criticism and to help determine the future course of the church. His numerous letters, treatises, and poems help illuminate, from an insider's perspective, these tumultuous years by identifying the primary beliefs and concerns which preoccupied powerful members of the church during this period. As Bellitto aptly demonstrates, historians who have portrayed the late medieval church as complacent, indifferent to criticism, and immune to calls for reform fail to take into account individuals like Clamanges, whose clamor for reform clearly demonstrates an awareness of the problems plaguing the church alongside the urgent need for reform. Bellitto accurately situates Clamanges within the context of the late Middle Ages, both informed by and contributing to conceptions of spirituality that emphasized interior piety and personal reform.

Erin L. Jordan □
University of Northern Colorado
ejordan@bentley.unco.edu

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172