

ZACHARY A. MATUS, *FRANCISCANS AND THE ELIXIR OF LIFE: RELIGION AND SCIENCE IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES*, PHILADELPHIA: UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS, 2017, 203 PP., ISBN 9780812249217 (PBK) – 9780812294064 (EBK)

ATHANASIOS RINOTAS*
UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN



Zachary Matus's *Franciscans and the Elixir of Life: Religion and Science in the Later Middle Ages* sheds new light on the relationship between the Franciscan Order and alchemy in the Later Middle Ages. By drawing largely on his dissertation, he attempts to show how the Franciscan religious tradition and discourses influenced and partially formulated the alchemical notion of the 'elixir' of the three Franciscan representatives (Roger Bacon, Vitalis of Furno and John of Rupescissa) who are under scrutiny. Thus, Matus explores how such subjects as those of ritual life, Apocalypticism, alchemy and natural philosophy are entwined and how they interacted within the realms of the Franciscan Order.

Matus's book is comprised of six chapters, introduction and conclusion included. In his introduction he deals with a variety of diverse matters beginning with a short introductory account on medieval alchemy (pp. 1–4). This account is neither thorough nor complete something that is remedied in the second chapter, where he supplies us with more introductory details on medieval alchemy before he delves into matters connected with elixirs. Matus continues his introduction by first making a biographical presentation of the three medieval scholars under scrutiny (pp. 4–7), whereas afterwards he deploys his main arguments on which he bases his methodology and strategy regarding the material he deals with. In particular Matus adduces the following points: a) writing about alchemy did not require a radical intellectual break with the rest of Franciscan intellectual culture; b) for the friars of this study, alchemy's materiality and attention to the physical world was what conspicuously linked it to religion; and c) the religious and even the liturgical world of the Franciscans left an impact on their alchemical works (p. 8). In the last pages of his intro (pp. 9–14) he comments on the special meaning of certain words that he uses (ritual, science and religion) and at the end he provides us with a short description of the chapters of his book.

* Ph.D. fellowship of the Research Foundation–Flanders (FWO) at the University of Leuven.

In the first chapter (pp. 15–39) that bears the title ‘Franciscans and the Sacral Cosmos’ Matus brings forth his first introductory argument and thus he attempts to show that there is a philosophical background in the Franciscan commentaries of *Genesis* which allow us in turn to create a *liaison* between the Franciscan Order and alchemy on the ground that the Order had always an open window to subjects pertaining to natural philosophy. In order to accomplish his goal, he deals with the cases of Francis of Assisi, of Bonaventure and of Peter Olivi and he aims to make clear that the Creation described in the Franciscan commentaries of *Genesis* is better understood if ‘tools’ provided by natural philosophy were employed. However, the point that Matus wishes to make becomes clearer and more evident in the latter case, that of Peter Olivi, whose reference to the existence of a protean stuff as an intermediate step in creation, which is not necessarily identified with matter, alludes to central doctrines of alchemy.

Consequently, in the second chapter (pp. 40–69), named ‘Three Elixirs’, Matus evokes the second argument of his introduction. He presents the genealogies of the three elixirs, that is, how religious elements interacted with philosophical ones so as to formulate the notion of ‘elixir’ in each case of the representatives of the Franciscan Order. Starting with the case of Roger Bacon, the author explicates how the notion of the ‘resurrected body’ and its ‘perfect body complexion’ played a crucial role in depicting the elixir as a key factor for conferring a balanced complexion on the human body and an improvement on human morals. Then, he passes to the case of Vitalis of Furno by showing how the *aqua ardens* was conflated with the theriac in terms of its use and application, whereas in Vitalis’s case Matus stresses the fact we have an example of how religion might constrain alchemy. In the last case, that of John of Rupescissa, Matus portrays John’s elixir as a distillate of heavens, an expression which could be plausibly justified by the pivotal position of the ‘quintessence’ in John’s alchemy.

In the third chapter (pp. 70–98), the ‘Apocalyptic Imperative’, Matus expands his theological approach on the elixir further by connecting it to medieval Apocalypticism. The author, after having detailed the Apocalyptic influence of Joachim de Fiore towards the Franciscan Order, passes once again to the case of Bacon. For the English medieval scholar, the elixir was seen as the ultimate weapon in the imminent battle against the Antichrist and thus the Church should have availed itself of it before the Antichrist had had the opportunity to do so first. In this endeavour, Roger envisioned the pope as *pastor angelicus* and as a key factor in Antichrist’s defeat. Afterwards, Matus delves into the case of Vitalis whose commentary on the Apocalypse contains a condemnation of Aristotle and Plato. Provided that Vitalis’s work cannot be characterised as an alchemical one *per se*, Matus draws, at first, a line of connection between Vitalis and the Apocalyptic thought of Peter Olivi and then he proceeds by arguing that Vitalis’s

Apocalyptic commentary could be used so as to clarify and demarcate his limits with respect to worldly knowledge and therefore to alchemy or medicine. At the end of this chapter, Matus deals with John of Rupescissa who had influences from both Joachim de Fiore and Peter Olivi. John of Rupescissa, like Bacon, conceived of the elixir as a weapon to combat the Antichrist and a way for the Christians to maintain their 'Christianity'. Yet, the difference with Bacon was that John saw the elixir as a 'tool' which could be produced by cheap materials of the mundane world and as a means which could cure the wounds of the war, instead of considering it as a pivotal factor in Antichrist's defeat.

The final chapter is the largest in extent (pp. 99–138) and bears the title 'A Subjunctive Science'. By far, this is the point where Matus's third introductory argument is best reflected. Matus's main goal is to show how Bacon and John of Rupescissa theorized their elixir and conceived of it in terms of praxis. Thus, Matus construes their understanding on elixir as *ritual*, a term that implies divine invocation and participation. At the beginning, Matus adduces what both scholars did not do so as to set them free from any connections to magic and Hermeticism. Consequently, he gives examples from the ritual tradition of the Franciscans which thus create a fruitful substrate for Matus's interpretation of alchemy in terms of the notion of *ritual*. Finally, he unfolds his main argument according to which both Roger and John thought of the elixir as a compound which *could* or *should* be realized in a world as it *could* or *should* be. As the author stresses, the notion of 'subjunctive reality' does not refer to a non-reality but to a potential reality, being totally in accordance with the Scripture and the theological tenets of the Church. In this manner, Matus justifies how it was possible for the two Franciscan friars to maintain their faith in the elixir despite the fact they never really produced it or even saw it.

In the 'Conclusion' Matus elaborates on the notion of *secret* by making reference to Eamon's work. By doing so, he creates a line of connection between the medieval world and Early modern Europe and he also gives us an insight of the fate of the examined scholars in the latter period. Afterwards, Matus goes on with the main inferences from the material presented in the previous chapters.

When it comes to evaluating Matus's book, one cannot but assess it in a positive way. At first place, Matus's central argument that the Franciscan religious tradition entwined with elements of natural philosophy has influenced in large part the alchemy of the three Franciscan scholars is something that permeates all the chapters of the book. His 'religious' reading and interpretation of the 'three elixirs' provides us with new and novel knowledge on the aforementioned subject. Furthermore, Matus organizes his material in a concise and coherent way, since on the one hand his introductory commitments are confirmed throughout the unfolding of the chapters, whereas he always takes care to ensure a smooth transition from one chapter to another. Congruently,

Matus's documentation of his arguments is always accurate and valid, given that he always supplies us with the Latin genuine version of the texts he uses. Finally, the presentation of the three Franciscan scholars is well balanced in terms of page-space and thorough analysis, an element which allows the reader to easily bear in mind the main points of each representative and mostly in a comparative way.

However, Matus's book contains some weaknesses too, which should not be taken as a factor of diminishing the value of the book. At first, Vitalis's Apocalyptic reading is a bit far-fetched in comparison to the Apocalyptic one of the other two Franciscan scholars adduced, whereas on the other hand Vitalis's implicit connection-relation, as Matus admits, to alchemy does not really provide us with substantial ground to draw analogous inferences as those drawn for the other two scholars. Finally, I also find Matus's analysis on the Franciscan approach to natural philosophy fair but still not in depth. To explain myself, given that Matus's aim is to draw a line of connection between the Franciscan approach to natural philosophy and alchemy, he does so by referring to subjects that are pertinent, but not directly relevant, to alchemy. For example, in the mid-thirteenth and early fourteenth century there was a fervent debate, better known as *Sciant Artifices*, which was significantly coloured in a philosophical way. Particularly, it dealt with the 'art versus nature' debate and with the question of 'transmutation of the species'. As Newman has showed, several Franciscans, including Roger Bacon, were also involved in this discourse and therefore a scrutiny of Franciscan natural philosophy under the lens of the *Sciant Artifices* would have revealed a more elaborated picture upon the matter.

Concluding this book review, I find Matus's book not just a good reading but also a significant contribution to the studies of alchemy. Yet, any weaknesses depicted should not be regarded as omissions that tamper with the quality of the book, but rather as suggestions that purport to the better understanding of the material presented.