

LESLEY SMITH, *FRAGMENTS OF A WORLD: WILLIAM OF AUVERGNE AND HIS MEDIEVAL LIFE*, THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, CHICAGO 2023, 312 PP., ISBN: 9780226826189.

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Professor Lesley Smith should surely be congratulated for her recent book on the nowadays obscure thirteenth-century figure William of Auvergne. She should also be commended for taking such an interest in this rather forgotten thinker and providing one of the only English accounts of this great Scholastic master's life. William was the bishop of Paris from 1228 until his death in 1249. This accompanied by the fact that he was also a Master of Theology made him one of the most important intellectual and political figures on the scene in Paris during his day. « William was a highly respected thinker in his time » (p. 86) but has today been largely forgotten. Smith's *Fragments of a World: William of Auvergne and his Medieval Life* goes a long way toward rescuing this forgotten figure, his intellectual accomplishments and, most interestingly, also gives us some sense of what kind of man he was. This work is not a linear biography of William's life, but rather something of a circling portrait that looks at William mainly through the testimony of his sermons (of which we have around 600), but at times his theological works as well. Thus, while Smith's work in many ways depends on Noël Valois's *Guillaume d'Auvergne, évêque de Paris*, and perhaps does not surpass that work as a pure history (except perhaps in its attention to the context of the developing city and University of Paris), it is a helpful supplement as it is more attentive to William's personality and examines a number of topics that go unexamined in Valois's work, largely due to its close attention to William's sermons.

As the title suggests this portrait is constructed through fragmentary (but extensive) evidence. It is « a series of glimpses into William's world » and yet what is found is far from a fragmented personality. William's chief concerns seemed to be his love of teaching and study as well as a deep concern for his pastoral flock. This, no doubt, seems to have contributed to his amenability to the mendicant orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans and explains his criticism at times of the secular masters at the university. Still, to paint broadly, William was a man of two worlds that were to a great degree in tension. On the one hand, he was at least « a visitor » (shall we say) to the somewhat glamorous world of Louis IX and his

mother Blanche of Castile, the latter seems also to have been a good friend (p. 154). While, on the other, from his sermons we see him time and again valuing poverty and warning against the dangers of the world such as pleasure, money, worldly honor, power, vanity and so forth.

Two of the chief virtues of Smith's work are first the general explication of the context of the world in which William was born (perhaps in Aurillac), raised and found himself while in Paris. William was born into a time where we find something of a « twelfth-century Renaissance » as the city and University of Paris were developing, and new texts of Greek and Arabic learning were becoming available to the Medieval Latin West (p. 4). William found himself to be in something of the first generation of this reception of Greek and Arabic philosophical material. His major work the *Magisterium divinale et sapientiale* (written between 1223–1240s) is a highly synthetic project – almost summa-like in its structure as an ordered wisdom – whereby he takes what he finds to be true in the Christian tradition and in Greek and Arabic thought to give a sophisticated account of such topics as God, creation, providence, the soul, the *cur deus homo* question, virtues and vices as well as to refute the perceived dangers concomitant in these Greek and Arabic works such as the eternity of the world, the necessity of creation and mediation of God's creative act by separate intelligences. Smith is even attentive to the fact that in William's work, one of the principal sources (perhaps the principal source for William's philosophical thought) is Avicenna and that William even follows Avicenna in regarding God's proper name as *necesse esse per se* (p. 80).

This willingness to seek the truth found in philosophical texts is underscored by William's favorite analogy of seeing the world as a book written by God and so all things as bespeaking something of their author. To quote the text,

William saw the world as the book the Creator had written so that humans could understand him. This gave him free rein to use anything and everything to shed light on the workings of God, drawing lessons from the most surprising everyday things (p. 178).

Thus, not only was William open to what was correctly written about the created world so as to lead us to some understanding of God and creation in the works of such important figures as Plato, Aristotle, Avicenna, Boethius, Augustine, Anselm, or the *Liber de Causis*, but he was also very attentive to his own experience from which he drew spiritual and moral analogies from even such things as baby spiders, toy bows and arrows used by children or drunk people falling into latrines.

This leads to the book's second chief virtue: the sheer number of different topics Smith examines in relation to William. This makes this work at once quite original and very enjoyable. Smith examines William's thoughts on a plethora of

different topics such as language, knowing, women, the Jewish people, the societally weak and marginalized, poverty, animals, food and drink and death. From all these diverse topics and his large number of sermons and personal comments we probably have a much better understanding of what William was like as a man, than we do of more popular figures such as Thomas Aquinas or Albert the Great.

From these we can surmise that he was probably an excellent preacher and took his duties to his parishioners and his care for their souls very seriously. He had something of a reformer's spirit, worked against pluralism – from which William apparently received considerable opposition from Philip the Chancellor (p. 67) – and was very concerned with Churchmen being occasions for scandal to the laity. One is tempted to think that if the Dominicans and Franciscans had found in Paris a Bishop more concerned with taking care of « his own » (the secular master's) the history of these Orders may have looked considerably different in Paris as it was under William that Roland of Cremona, John of St. Giles and Alexander of Hales all took the habit and were allowed to keep their university chairs. But William's « own » was the Church and he was concerned primarily with the care of those in his flock and the study of the truth. Thus, it is highly likely that « in the mendicants William thought he had found men after his own heart: educated and serious... [sharing] his focus on preaching and poverty » (p. 67).

Although he was a man of his times, we also find him to be a man of peace with « little taste for military expeditions » (p. 68) and a supporter of women (p. 120). He was especially concerned about their vulnerability at the hands of their family, husbands, priests and prostitution. William, to his credit, recognized that women turned to prostitution out of poverty and not immorality and « founded a religious house in Paris for former prostitutes, named the Daughters of God » (p. 122). According to Smith, « poverty is probably the single topic that William most often addresses » in his sermons and saw riches as a spiritual obstacle (p. 137). Interestingly, William categorically disagreed « with Aristotle's statement that the female is an imperfect male » (p. 123). William also seems to be a man with a good sense of humor, good taste in wine and a lover of dogs, saying if « you love me, love my dog » (p. 53).

While aspects of William's moral and pastoral theology, taken principally from his sermons, make many appearances as William articulates for his audience, often using colorful and insightful analogies, the nature of sin, vice, faith and virtue, this book would have benefitted from two helpful additions. The first is that while we have no solid dates for William's life prior to 1223, a brief chronological sketch of William's life from 1223 on, as far as possible, would have been quite desirable for both the specialist and the general reader. Smith's self-avowed goal was not to attempt a chronological biography, but a quick chronological sketch could have

been beneficial in order to give something of a historical skeleton to the circling portrait.

A second relevant addition to this publication would have been a more detailed treatment of William's philosophy and systematic theology. It would not be fair to say that these topics are absent especially as more aspects of the latter are treated in the chapter « Death and Beyond ». Nevertheless, since this work approaches William mainly through his sermons and ethical writings, considering in more detail William's philosophical and systematic theology could have achieved a more balanced presentation of William's thought. Although the author does spend some time discussing William's understanding of the soul, sin and death and comments a few times on the general importance of Avicenna, for these more speculative topics to be so lightly treated in a book on one of the most important Masters of Theology, one does not retain the sense of how cutting-edge William really was. Having read this book, the general reader would be informed that William wrote his *Magisterium Divinale et Sapientiale*, that this was a highly synthetic project, and that William was among the first in the West to seriously engage the newly translated Aristotelian and Arabic works, but would be left almost completely unaware of what most of William signature philosophical and theological teachings were or what his great synthesis consisted in. Here I suggest that this general work on William's life and thought would have benefitted from a brief and somewhat general discussion of William's understanding of the relationship of God to the world as seen, for example, in the first fourteen or so chapters of the *De Trinitate* and various texts from *De Universo*, where William critiques the Aristotelian-Avicennian universe. Just by way of example, William seems to be the first (certainly one of the first) to introduce the Avicennian distinction between essence and existence in creatures and their identity in God into the Latin West, which is, of course, a very important topic for medieval philosophy. William then goes on to use this distinction to great effect in articulating the relationship between God and the world or when critiquing the « Manicheans ». Additionally, some discussion of William's account of God as the intelligible world, the exemplar of all things and his analogy of all creatures as reflections of God as in a mirror would have connected quite nicely to his understanding of the universe as a book written by God.

Or to take another example, very little is said on the important issues of William's answer to the important *cur deus homo* question, his understanding of the Trinity, or even his epistemology. These topics are almost entirely unremarked upon, although his understanding of the sacraments, the soul and death are treated significantly. Of course, one can always suggest that a given book could have done more – and in the author's defense a full treatment of all these topics could have called for several monographs – but in the case of William, his philosophical and theological thought was an enormously important dimension of

his life (and time) and without more being said something of the portrait that is available to us of this great man remains unsketched.

All in all, *Fragments of a World* is a well written, enjoyable, and original work. Its detailed attention to what can be learned about William from his sermons is of considerable value. This work sets out in search of a human being and in this Smith certainly succeeds, even if he is only « reflected in a smokey mirror » (p. 216).