

Bert Roest, Pietro Delcorno (eds.), *Observant Reform and Cultural Production in Europe: Learning, Liturgy and Spiritual Practice* (Nijmegen: Radboud University Press, 2023), 302 pages

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The collective volume under review represents the outcome of a collaborative research initiative aimed at examining diverse aspects of the Observant reforms. Edited by Bert Roest and Pietro Delcorno – both recognized for their substantial work on medieval religious life, particularly concerning the mendicant orders – the volume brings together papers originally presented at a virtual workshop hosted by Radboud University (Nijmegen) in 2021. The workshop, and by extension the volume, centres on a topic with great potential and solid premises: the impact of the Observant movements on the cultural production during late middle ages and early modern times. A part of the contributions, especially those concerned with the Italian context, also address the interplay of Observance and Humanism/ Renaissance as reflected in the written production, preaching strategies, as well as in various artistic expressions (architecture, church decoration, music).

The open-access volume comprises twelve scholarly contributions, framed by an introductory chapter signed by Bert Roest, and a series of very useful indices of places, names, and subjects. The introduction, besides presenting the concept, aims and limits of the book, provides an excellent synthetic discussion of the previous scientific acquisitions related to the impact of religious reform movements on the late medieval cultural output. The cultivation of specific literary genres, the production of vernacular religious

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writings, library formation, the pursuit of higher education, “the late medieval preaching revolution” stimulated by printing, female literacy and scriptorial activity are highlighted as features and consequences of the Observant reforms explored in the historiography during the last decades. Within this reference frame, the volume is announced to provide further insights into three key aspects: the book culture, education and preaching; liturgical practices; and “Observant spiritualities and their practical and material consequences” (p. 23). Each of these facets of the Observance is explored across four papers, although this organization of the materials is not outlined by their division into chapters.

Pertaining to the investigations of preaching in Observant contexts are the studies of Cecile Caby and Pietro Delcorno, both emphasizing the rise of the humanist rhetoric and the interest in education cultivated in various Reform movements. Caby deals with the topic of preaching in general and provincial chapters – a type and context of preaching that hereby receives its well-deserved attention – as means of communication, identity formation and reform promotion within religious orders. After a short overview on the evolution of chapter preaching from the 12th century onwards, the author insists on the profile of this homiletic activity in 15th-century Italy, underlining the adoption of humanist oratory, the topics commonly addressed and how Observance was encouraged through chapter speeches in the context of Franciscan, Augustinian and Olivetan reform. Pietro Delcorno sheds light on a lesser-known Franciscan Observant preacher, Apollonio Bianchi. The author proposes the inspired concept of hybrid or “amphibious” cultural identity for characterizing this Italian friar, able to both act as a popular preacher and to exercise fine humanist discursive techniques. Moreover, his case is chosen as an example of how Franciscan reform was practiced, defined and advertised by a less prominent figure, offering a broader, presumably more representative perspective on the phenomenon and revealing its variety and complexity.

Leaving aside the order of the studies in the volume, preaching is also addressed in the study signed by Pablo Acosta-Garcia, from the perspective of homiletic activity conducted in female religious houses. Dealing with a sermon collection of a female preacher, Juana de la Cruz – one of the charismatic, visionary figures of the Castilian Observance – in preparation of a critical edition, the author convincingly argues that this work involved a collective authorship. *Libro del Conorte* appears as a product of *scrittura comunitaria*,

reflecting not the “original,” “authentic” ecstatic preaching of Juana, but rather the reception, recollection and remembrance of her sermons by her fellow nuns. Therefore, beyond the undertaken analysis, Acosta-Garcia’s contribution illustrates the dynamic literary activity of female Observance. Patricia Stoop offers further insights into access of female communities to Observant sermons. Her paper focuses particularly on the case of Middle Dutch sermons of Observant Friars Minors and their circulation in female convents associated with *Devotio Moderna* from the Low Countries. Stoop proves that these women benefited not only from the preaching services of their confessors, but also invited preachers from outside their order, actively participating in the recollection of their sermons, while also copying homiletic texts of important Observant Franciscan friars. Hence, the study demonstrates the impact of the message of the Friars Minor in the Low Countries, surpassing the confines of their order, and its transmission through the conscious involvement with the written culture of female communities. Silvia Serventi provides a further example in this respect. Her study examines the influence of Catherina of Siena’s writings outside the Dominican order, by analysing the works of two Italian Poor Clares, with similar aristocratic origins and humanist education: Caterina Vigri and Camilla Battista of Varano. While the Catherinian influence is not always water-clear or seems sometimes to have been mediated by other authors, the article proves that all these female authors shared a common ethos, a similar approach and sometimes very close wording choices, showing the intersecting paths of different Observant movements.

Along the same lines of the female Observant experience and its contribution to cultural production, Kristin Hoefner examines the liturgical books produced for internal use within a female Dominican convent from Aveiro, Portugal. The study focuses on the chant repertoire in the 17 preserved manuscripts, produced between 1470 and approx. 1500, in order to identify specific Observant features. A different approach to the musical landscape of Observant churches is brought by Hugo Perina, who sought to grasp the attitude of the Reform movements concerning an innovative and expensive instrument, the organ. Methodologically, the article approaches the topic from the perspective of norms vs. practice. Perina underlines certain initiatives meant to regulate the presence and the use of organs in liturgical context – in order to avoid distractions from the service or the mishearing of certain

prayers – but no coherent program of forbidding this instrument. In practice, the mendicant churches were often adorned with the popular instrument, while friars were involved in both building and playing organs.

In terms of liturgical space and practices, Haude Marvan contributes with a study concerning the modernization of church interiors at the turn of the 16th century, trying to discern if and how the Observant movement influenced the options of the Dominican Order in this regard. Her provisional conclusions, based on a handful of Italian case studies, suggest that no correlation can be stressed between the architectural alterations – referring exclusively to the elimination of the rood screen or the relocation of the choir in the apse – and the return to the pristine ideals of the Friars Preachers. When such modifications occurred, the reasons were circumstantial and functional.

Architecture and especially decoration in Observant context are also explored in Roberto Ciobianchi's paper from a fresh and interesting angle. The author considers spaces that became instrumental to the pursuit of education, namely libraries, conducting a comparative examination of the visual messages transmitted by the decor of such rooms in Dominican, Franciscan and Augustinian convents. These examples demonstrate that although lavish decoration would have contravened the Observant aspiration towards poverty and humbleness, libraries were often adorned with large frescoes, intended to forge an Observant self-identity. The depiction of portraits of illustrious members of the order, significant for their intellectual achievements (not necessarily saints), seems to have been the chosen strategy. It can be, thus, added to the traditional repertoire of Observant identity politics, as order historiography, hagiographical writings and other means of promoting older and newer internal saintly figures. The last-mentioned approach makes up the topic of a study signed by Ana Marinkovic and Valentina Zivkovic. Addressing the reformation of the convents of the Friars Preacher in south-eastern Adriatic, the two authors investigate the appropriation of the cults of Dominican saints in the region, as attested by visual sources, churches and altars dedications, and hagiographies. Different stages of the adoption of the Observance seem to have been associated with different saints, be they universal (Vincent Ferrer, Catherine of Siena) or local/regional (Marcolino of Fiorli, Guido of Naples, Osanna from Kotor or Margaret of Hungary), depending on who were the supporters and promoters of reform.

The intricacy and variety of Observantism are brought to light by Koen Goudriaan and Emilia Jamroziak, in addition to some of the already discussed papers. Goudriaan's contribution discusses the profile of an lesser-studied group of convents of the Tertiaries in Western Flanders, called "the Ypres group," delineating a set of peculiarities that define their spirituality. From the very beginning, the functioning of these convents included the adoption of the three vows, but not the enclosure, thus putting great emphasis on liturgical obligations, while allowing labour without very clear regulations. Moreover, this group of Tertiaries resisted all initiatives related to their submission to the Friars Minor and was also "outside the orbit of *Devotio Moderna*," not involved in the dynamic manuscript culture of most female communities from the Low Countries, creating its own path, that was neither fully contemplative, nor particularly active. This interesting case illustrates the difficulties encountered when trying to define what Observance is or is not. In the same line of thought, Emilia Jamroziak's study questions the existence of an Observant movement within the Cistercian Order. While there was "no institutional, formalized" Observance, the author demonstrates that typical Observant concerns can be traced in the various reform projects related to Cistercians in the late Middle Ages, whether they came from papal or internal initiative, but often under the influence of other religious orders.

The volume closes quite abruptly, without a section dedicated to conclusions. Although the introduction brings together the results of the comprised studies in a coherent narrative and opens further research perspectives, a concluding chapter would have benefited those interested in reading the book from cover to cover by providing a recapitulation of the main arguments and formulating critical reflections concerning the outcomes, challenges and further questions. This is only a minor shortcoming that does not diminish the great value of the reviewed volume. It represents a useful resource, appropriate both for sequential reading – which brings a polyangular comprehension of the subject – and for the more common non-linear, selective approach, able to meet the interests of a diverse public (medievalists interested in religious and ecclesiastic history, literacy and book culture, sermon studies, urban history or gender studies, theologians, art historians, musicologists, codicologists etc.). The volume offers a rich and nuanced picture of the Observant reforms as they unfolded in Italy, the Low Countries, Castile or Dalmatia. A complementary examination of Central European evolutions

would further enhance the panorama, enriching the broader understanding of the movement's European dynamics. Following a historiographical dossier (2018) and recently joined by another collective approach of the Observant reforms (2025), the volume contributes greatly to the objectives of the project "Observer l'Observance," facilitating a thorough understanding of these polymorphous religious movements. In addition to the significant individual input of each essay, often presenting cutting-edge research, the volume as a whole has the great merit of implementing "order-transgressing approaches" (p. 25) to the study of late medieval religious life, literature and reforms.