

The Androgynous Ideal

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A World Without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture of Western Science, by David F. Noble, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)

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During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, maintains David Noble, professor of history at York University in Toronto, church reformers mounted a sustained and blatantly misogynist assault on clerical marriage in an effort to remake the church into the image of the cloister. While the last vestige of womanly influence in the church was being expunged, there was a flowering of “homoerotic expressiveness”¹ and even “homoerotic practice” among monks and priests, which was not only tolerated but celebrated. In fact, “gay priests” were in the forefront of condemning and prohibiting clerical marriage. One married priest responded to the reformers in a poem that included the line, “Leave us alone and chastise yourself, sodomite!”

Anselm of Canterbury, still studied by philosophers for his ontological argument for the existence of God and by theologians for his defense of the satisfaction view of the atonement, was one of the prominent participants in this new “homoerotic” monastic culture. Noble characterizes Anselm's relationship with his young disciple Osbern as “one of the most significant love relationships in the medieval period about which we know anything at all.”² As evidence of the nature of the archbishop's male relationships, Noble quotes this from a letter of Anselm:

my eyes eagerly long to see your face, most beloved; my arms stretch out to your embraces. My lips long for your kisses; whatever remains of my life desires your company, so that my soul's joy may be full in time to come (quoted on p. 134).

Anselm, Noble claims, “vigorously condemned erotic relationships between clergy and

1 The phrase is from Natalie Zelmon Davis, “Introduction” to Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), p. xi.

2 Noble quotes this description, apparently from R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm and his Biographer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

women” but was “noticeably reluctant to condemn such relationships between men” (p. 135).

The two pages on which this discussion occurs illustrate as well as anything the numerous flaws of Noble's ambitious book. First, here as elsewhere, Noble attaches vague and therefore misleading labels to the cultural currents he describes. In the 1990s, to say that someone is “homoerotic” or engaged in “homoerotic practice” is to imply he has committed acts of homosexual sodomy; “homoerotic culture” suggests the “gay life-style” of bathhouses, gay bookstores and journals, anonymous sodomy in public toilets, and deadly disease. Noble surely knows what his labels will connote to the contemporary reader, yet he applies them not to modern San Francisco but to medieval monasteries. Noble, however, offers no real evidence (records of church courts, for example) that any of the monks or priests he mentions committed acts of sodomy. Instead, he cites poetry and letters that express (vividly, to be sure) one monk's love for his fellows, another's intense longing for the presence of friends, another's desire to greet his friends with kisses and hugs. Having spread the net of “homoerotic practice” so wide, it's no surprise that Noble is able to catch a few fish.

Second, throughout his book, Noble relies almost exclusively on secondary sources. In itself, this is hardly a telling criticism; no historian who covers two millennia of intellectual and cultural history, as Noble does, can be expected to have mastered all the relevant original documents. Noble's problem is that he relies on inaccurate secondary sources. In his discussion of the early church, Noble depends heavily on the tendentious and error-ridden work of Elaine Pagels.³ For his account of the rise of monastic “homoeroticism” Noble frequently cites the revisionist gay historiography of John Boswell.⁴

On the other hand, Noble ignores secondary literature that would be damaging to his thesis. His suggestion that monks were invariably misogynist and hostile to marriage is extremely imbalanced.⁵ Moreover, he never refers to scholarship that disputes Boswell's interpretation of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. *A World Without Women* was published in 1992; two years before, R. W. Southern published his magnificent *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape*,⁶ literally the fruit of a lifetime of study of medieval Europe and of Anselm, in which Southern carefully demolishes some of Boswell's central claims about Anselm and eleventh-century “homoeroticism”. Perhaps, though, Southern's work was unavailable to Noble when his manuscript went to press.

3 See my review of Pagels's *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* in *Westminster Theological Journal* 51:1 (Spring 1989), pp. 183-87. Noble also employs Peter Brown's more accurate *The Body and Society*. See my review of Brown in *Westminster Theological Journal* 52:1 (Spring 1990), pp. 163-65.

4 Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). On Boswell, see, most recently, Richard John Neuhaus, “In the Case of John Boswell”, *First Things* (March 1994), pp. 56-59.

5 See Jean LeClercq, *Monks on Marriage: A Twelfth-Century View* (New York: Seabury, 1982).

6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Still, the evidence that Noble cites is often either wrong or used in erroneous ways; a little self-critical checking of sources would have saved embarrassment. Noble writes, for example, that Anselm had a significant “love relationship” with his disciple Osbern; he adds that Anselm sought out friendship and love only from men; he follows by citing the letter quoted above. The implication of this series of sentences is that Anselm's letter was written to Osbern or another of his male lovers. It is therefore a shock to learn from Southern that the letter in question was actually written to “two young relatives who had arrived at [the monastery of] Bec during [Anselm's] absence”, relatives whom Anselm “had probably never met”.⁷ The remainder of the letter, further, makes it clear that Anselm wrote to encourage the recruits to persevere with him in the pursuit of the monastic life.⁸ The simple fact that Anselm would write so passionately of his love for men he did not know personally is enough to demonstrate the shallowness of Boswell's and Noble's appraisal.⁹

Noble, again following Boswell, states that Anselm, among others, was “reluctant to condemn” homosexual relations among monks. Southern states that, on the contrary, “Anselm was an innovator in proposing detailed action against sodomy”. His legislation “was framed to bring a limited range of common homosexual practices to the notice of parishioners in every parochial church with penalties attached.” In reply to Noble's and Boswell's larger claim that the church tolerated “homoeroticism” during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Southern asserts that earlier condemnations of sodomy show “no sign of falling off in the eleventh century”.¹⁰ Boswell makes a big point out of the fact that sodomy was treated in penitential literature as only one among many forbidden sexual acts. This, Southern counters, is no sign of tolerance; instead, “the only relevant generalization which emerges from the penitential codes down to the eleventh century is that sodomy was treated on about the same level as copulation with animals”.¹¹

Even without Southern's well-informed counter arguments, it should have been clear to Noble that Boswell deploys evidence in highly questionable ways. Noble cites, from Boswell, a line of a satirical poem written by a married clergyman to the effect that advocates of celibacy were sodomites.¹² When did historians become so simple as to take at face value charges made by satirical poets in the heat of politico-ecclesiastical struggle?

Were there sodomite monks and priests during the middle ages? No doubt some clerics were guilty of homosexual sodomy then, as some are today. But Noble simply has no defense for his claim that the church tolerated and celebrated them.

7 Ibid., p. 155.

8 Ibid, pp. 155-56.

9 Southern places this and similar passages in context with a discussion of Anselm's “theology of friendship” and of the novel rhetoric of his letters, in *ibid.*, ch. 7.

10 Ibid., p. 148.

11 Ibid., pp. 149-50.

12 See the full text of the poem in Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, pp. 398-99.

Noble's inaccuracies are unfortunate, because in a number of specific areas his discussions are illuminating. He uses, for example, the growing literature that details the connections between alchemy, the occult, and modern science, and provides a chilling account of the imposition of celibacy on married clergy by the monastic reformers of the eleventh century. A married priest was “forced to separate from his wife and children, or may have suffered severe penalties for refusing to do so: loss of his benefice and salary, loss of his priestly ordination, being fined, publicly ridiculed, imprisoned, even physically harassed, his children disinherited and declared illegitimate”; married priests who refused to cooperate were “reduced to poverty, homeless, exiled, others mutilated, tortured, murdered” (quoted on p. 129). This surely deserves a place among the most appalling chapters in medieval history.

Moreover, Noble's basic thesis—that Western science, learning, and higher education developed in social settings that systematically excluded women as participants and, in many cases, even as spouses—is one of those facts so obvious that it is often overlooked and rarely analyzed. To use Noble's own terminology, his book recounts a development from the early church's “androgynous asceticism” to medieval Christianity's “clerical asceticism” to the “scientific asceticism” of modern Western science.

The androgynous ideal was based on the belief that, through baptism, a believer transcends his or her sexuality. The baptized can live chastely even in the presence of the opposite sex. Celibacy was central to androgynous Christian culture. Virginitly was celebrated by church fathers as the way of liberation from the snares of the world; in actual practice, it offered one of the few opportunities for women to gain notoriety and authority outside the normal channels of marriage and household management. The androgynous ideal provided theological legitimation for the prominent role played by women from the earliest Christian communities to the tenth century. Given the domestic location of the earliest Christian churches, women were inevitably prominent. Double monasteries, where men and women lived at the same site in separate quarters, were frequent during the first millennium of Christian history, and some were presided over by abbesses. Abbesses sometimes even had authority to hear confession and excommunicate. For the first millennia of Christianity, most clergymen were married. Women had access to Bible teaching and exercised both official and unofficial authority within the church.

Alongside this androgynous ideal, however, another ascetic ideal was gaining ground. According to what Noble calls the “clerical ascetic” view, sexual desire was an ineradicable and volatile source of temptation; even baptized Christians were under its power. Under such circumstances, then, clerical ascetics concluded that it was better to avoid contact with women completely, lest their seductive powers lead to sin. Clerical asceticism was virulently misogynous; women are dangerous to spiritual health. It originated in response to the larger problem of the church's self-definition that faced Christians during the second and third centuries. Clerics seeking to maintain their power sharpened their attacks on heresy, but at the same time adopted practices of heretical sects—including celibacy. Celibacy came in time to signify the superiority of the clergy over the mass of married laity.

With the increasing “militarization” of the monasteries during the medieval period—the shift from monasteries as places of refuge in which to pursue individual salvation to monasteries as shock troops of spiritual warfare—women, considered unfit for such masculine endeavors, became even more marginalized. Androgyny was revived during the high middle ages only in heretical movements.

The universities that grew out of cathedral schools during the high middle ages adopted the clerical ascetic ideal. Scholarship was considered a form of warfare with heresy, symbolized by the agonistic forum of the debate. This exclusively masculine setting was later impressed on the early institutions of modern science, which operated according to what Noble calls a “scientific asceticism”.

There are numerous debatable aspects in this account, not least the use of the term “androgyny” and the characterization of “orthodoxy” as an ideology whose purpose was to buttress the power of the ruling clerical class. Yet, the truth of Noble's central thesis can hardly be denied, and it is a history that raises a series of hypothetical but intriguing questions. What difference would it have made in the development of Western theology and Christian practice if Aquinas, Bonaventure, Anselm, and Gregory VII had been married? How would modern science have developed differently if Newton had not spent his life cloistered at Cambridge? In what direction might such women as Margaret Cavendish (pp. 230-1) have pushed science and learning if they had been admitted to the Royal Society or the universities?

Noble addresses these questions in a couple of ways. He examines several cases of woman philosophers and natural scientists who challenged Western tendencies toward dissection, dualism, diversity, and mechanization in favor of wholeness, monism, unity, and organicism (pp. 199-201, 211). Noble seems to imply that a woman's response to the world naturally differs from a man's. On the other hand, Noble claims the separation of clergy and monks from women forced men to do the work of women: “Confronted with this dire prospect, they began almost at once to devise mechanical substitutes for human labor” (p. 283). Thus, Western science is largely an effort to produce technologies, including reproductive technologies, that would make the existence of women unnecessary, what we might call the Frankenstein project.

Noble's second answer begs the obvious question, Why didn't women invent labor saving devices long before? That they did not suggests that Noble's first answer is closer to the truth. Sexuality is inseparable from character; the difference is far more profound than anatomy. My being as a person is being a man, as my wife's being is being a woman. Precisely how gender affects intellect is less obvious, though history suggests men are more apt to pursue science and technology. In spite of what Noble implies, this would be true even if science had not developed in a “world without women”. That gender is one of the shaping forces of human character, and therefore of human history is, however, a truth worth pondering. It would be valuable to have an accurate and careful book exploring these questions from an orthodox perspective. Noble's is not it.