

Serve the People

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“The last shall be first.” In the Middle Ages, having political power was understood as providing a service: effectively forestalling revolt. In the twelfth century, certain experiences in religious communities ran counter to the hierarchy that was felt to be natural. Should this be seen as something that was displaying democratic potential?

<p>Reviewed: Jacques Dalarun, <i>Gouverner, c’est servir: Essai de démocratie médiévale</i>, Paris, Alma Éditions, 2012, 453 p.</p>
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Jacques Dalarun is a leading expert in the history of St. Francis and the Franciscans. His latest book, *Gouverner, c’est servir: Essai de démocratie médiévale* (To Govern Is to Serve: An Essay in Medieval Democracy), is an essay in the political history of the West and a reflection on the foundations of democracy. It takes off from his reflection on a minor event, both edifying and entertaining, which is reported by Thomas of Celano (the first biographer of St. Francis and St. Clare) and by the witnesses of the canonization of Clare of Assisi. The episode can be related in a few words: Clare, the Abbess of San Damiano, often washed and kissed the maidservants’ feet. One day, one of the maidservants pulled back her foot just as the saint was about to place her lips upon it. This awkward gesture ended up by her kicking Clare’s mouth – but Clare nevertheless resumed kissing her foot.

As Dalarun points out in his preface, in politics as in many other areas the Middle Ages had a fundamental source to draw on: the Bible. What he calls the “Christian paradox of the medieval West” was its construction of a political system on scriptural foundations that in fact rejected power and hierarchies: “The wood of the cross is both the framework of medieval societies and a splinter in their flesh” (p. 14). Dalarun possesses the art of sharpening his readers’ thinking with formulations that are not mere metaphors, and which revive the

incisiveness of premises that we had come to regard as offering nothing new. The question he poses is both simple and daunting: how could an art of government and a society of orders emerge from biblical principles such as “the first shall be last”?

The first part of the book, “The Maidservant Served,” seven chapters with a rhapsodic air, dissects the episode of Clare and the kick. This encounter between the two women, the abbess and the maidservant, leads into the second part, “Unworthiness To Govern,” which explores the division of duties between full monks and associate brothers (*fratres conversi*) within religious communities, treated here as little political laboratories. The last part, “Maternal Government,” goes back to a text of Francis of Assisi, the *Spoletto Letter to Brother Leo*, which Dalarun translates and interprets in the light of Michel Foucault’s reflections on pastoral governance.

Politics can be discerned in the tiniest of facts; as Patrick Boucheron says, “in places where it is not clearly established, it can express itself in the spacing out of measured infringements, in the interplay of norms, or in the pauses in an evasive speech.”¹ The episode in Clare’s life is an excellent example. In this closed and regulated world, saintliness was a striking reminder of the paradoxical aspects of Christ. Clare washes the maidservant’s feet, probably on a Holy Thursday, in obedience to the rite of the *mandatum* prescribed by the Rule of Benedict and extended into royal courts, based on the model of Christ, who washed the feet of the Apostles (John xiii, 4-15), and on Matthew xx, 28 (Jesus “came not to be ministered unto, but to minister...”). The function of this rite was to emphasize the position of Clare as abbess of the convent. Her kiss has another biblical precedent, in which a “sinful woman,” traditionally identified as Mary Magdalene, washed the feet of Christ with her tears and kissed them (Luke vii, 36-50). Even the kick, which seemed to be the only slight novelty, had its precursor: “He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me” (John xiii, 18).

However, the rite of the *mandatum* does not efface the merits of St. Clare. The supporting part here is played not by the poor, who are mere “extras dazzled by the display of magnificent humility” (p. 76), but by one of the convent’s maidservants. Even in the convent, a noble lady like Clare and her inner circle of female relations and neighbours move as a group that, by social position and perhaps also by geographical origins, is distant from the

¹ Patrick Boucheron, *L’entretiens: Conversation sur l’histoire*, Verdier, Lagrasse, 2012, p. 93.

women who, although integrated into the community, are also separated by their roles of serving and of looking after relations with the outside world. The maidservant's pulling back also reveals the distance that separates her from the sisters, by showing that she lacks the cultural codes that would have enabled her correctly to interpret Clare's posture. The sisters also claimed to be servants, but of Christ, and Clare, their abbess, was thus "the servant of the servants of Christ," just as the pope was called "the servant of the servants of God." "Serving" must be part of the vocabulary of power.

In medieval society, kissing a foot could also be a sign of obedience or of submission to a higher authority. In other circumstances, Clare could have kissed the feet of the pope. Even in reversing the hierarchy by serving the maidservant, Clare was fully asserting her superiority, although in disturbing ways that Dalarun puts into the very broad perspective of a medieval Christianity that often legitimated a position even while criticizing it. This strategy both "fostered discrepancies and allowed their reabsorption into renewed norms" (p. 126). Making power into a service forestalls revolt, which is somehow already provided for and carried out in language.

The second part of the book highlights the context that St. Francis' thought and St. Clare's religious experience were part of, based mainly on the Rule of Benedict. The archaeology of government as service thus begins with St. Benedict. In his Rule, established in 817 throughout the Carolingian Empire, an abbot is someone "who should serve rather than lead," in the words of a contrast borrowed from Augustine (p. 136). But it is mainly the twelfth-century religious communities, influenced by the Gregorian reforms, that are referred to in order to understand the consequences of this reversal, especially through the role of the associate brothers. In contrast to monks who came into the monastery as child oblates, associate brothers turned to the religious life after some experience in the secular world; so no social status is revealed by the term. Also, in the double monastery of men and women that he founded in Fontevraud, Robert of Arbrissel decided to put a woman in charge, one who was moreover an associate sister. Although the founder's choice was not respected later on, his project was nevertheless remarked upon, in particular – in Dalarun's interpretation – in the eighth epistle of Abelard to Heloise. Pierre Abelard rejected having an abbess superior over the men, and especially over the clerics. He argued that the ideal monastery (Paraclete, as he imagined it) should be a double monastery led by the men. But Abelard agreed with Robert of

Arbrissel when he described the ideal abbot, the head of the female community, as the ladies' servant.

In the eleventh- and twelfth-century monastic reforms, the term “associate brother” took on a strong social connotation, especially with the decline of the oblates; from then on, the term was applied to illiterate servants who did not have the same social background as the proper monks. While the system let simple peasants embrace a religious life, these associates, sometimes called “lay brothers,” had neither the same functions nor the same powers in their communities. In the new, reformed orders such as Vallombrosa and Citeaux, the distinction between choir monks and associates was very marked; but in other communities, their place could vary and this led to some original compromises, of which Grandmont is probably the most dramatic example. In this hermit order, whose regulations were written shortly before 1156, nearly eighty years after its first foundation by Stephen of Muret, the prior (the name given to the abbot) was elected by a representative college of six clerics and six associates. The system could result in crises, no doubt less because of the parity given to the associates than because of the even number of electors.² However, the revolt by the associates that broke out in 1217 seems to have made a big impression, and it became an argument justifying the refusal given to St. Dominique, who – according to testimony given at his canonization – would have liked to assign the leadership of the Dominican order to the associates, so the monks could concentrate exclusively on their principal duties, study and preaching.

The Dominican founder's project, apparently quickly stifled, does not seem to have had an equivalent among the Friars Minor. Nevertheless, the “Rule for Hermitages,” an early text of St. Francis, calls on everyone in turn to take on the different responsibilities essential for effective organization of the community. In the Franciscan order the superior has the title “Minister” or, redundantly, “Minister and Servant.” In spite of this lack of distinction between responsibilities assigned, and the rejection of a highly defined hierarchy, the clericalization of the order, especially after the Gregory IX's bull *Quo elongati* of September 1230, led to there being within the order a clear partition between priests, clerics, and those who, being illiterate, were relegated to subordinate tasks. In 1239 the new Constitutions of the order forbade the recruitment of illiterate brothers. In this context, Pope Innocent IV's slip of the pen in 1254,

² Consider the electoral conflict in the English monastery at Bury, discussed by Alain Boureau in *La Loi du royaume: Les moines, le droit et la construction de la nation anglaise (XI^e- XIII^e siècle)*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2001.

designating illiterate brothers as “associates” (*conversi*) is not very surprising: St. Francis’ dream had disappeared, and with it the utopia of, if not a world upside down, at least a world without social distinctions.

Thus the records that Dalarun analyses show how with the Gregorian reforms it was possible to conceive of a new form of political organization that ran counter to the hierarchy that was felt to be natural. Making the last first (in some cases) amounted to emphasizing the principle of competence, an idea essential to democracy. Dalarun sounds a general alarm about the utopian formulation of the principle and the failure of its applications in the communities that he examines: “the democratic functioning of a community often has as a corollary an aristocratic closure in its recruitment” (p. 277). So only the idea of governing as serving makes it possible to resolve the tension between the demands of democracy in practice and openness in societies that respect those demands.

In the third part of the book, the point of departure is the series of lectures given by Michel Foucault in the early months of 1978, on “pastoral government,” the centrepiece of his genealogy of governmentality,³ this all-encompassing power characteristic of the West. Obedience, the keystone of the system, applies to the pastor who by humility refuses to command, in order to better accept power in the end, by obedience. A refusal of power, if truly realized, would be an expression of free will. So power is thought of as service. But this power can be challenged by asceticism (withdrawal), the refusal of the “false shepherd,” the principle of equality (everyone is a pastor), mysticism, scripture when it is not mediated by the pastor, or the eschatological belief in the return of the “true shepherd.” This investigation into Western power has been pursued by Giorgio Agamben, who situates the origin of the two forms of power exercised in the West – government (power as management) and glory (power as liturgy) – in the debates related to the definition of the Trinity.⁴

However, Dalarun revisits the idea that the medieval *regimen* is “a dead end in Western thought” (p. 311). In “In line with the sources” (p. 403), he proposes the interpretation of a

³ Michel Foucault, *Security, territory, population : lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, edited by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. First published in French: *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, Paris, Gallimard-Seuil, 2004.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government (Homo sacer, II, 2)*, translated into English by Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarini: Stanford University Press, 2011. First published in Italian: *Il regno e la gloria. Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo (Homo sacer, II, 2)*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 2007.

brief autograph text of St. Francis. Addressed to Brother Leo, this letter is written in a rough Latin. In appearance, it gives contradictory advice. Like a mother, Francis advises Leo not to come see him and to follow in all things the example of Christ. But in some lines added shortly afterwards, Francis says that Leo can come see him if he feels it necessary. As Leo Steinberg has shown that in apparently touching Renaissance scenes, the images of the Virgin and Child referred less to tenderness than to theology, Dalarun suggests a more institutional reading of the document (which the Latin of the text, even though faulty, readily confirms), in the light of pastoral government as defined by Foucault (whose thinking, like regular breathing, comes to the support all interpretations). Francis gave Leo an order: not to call upon him, and, in case of doubt about what conduct to adopt, to rely, he and all his brothers, on the example of Christ. Thus, the order “uttered in the name of obedience abolishes obedience as an external constraint” (p. 363), each brother being referred back to his own judgement. This order was given not “like a mother,” but “as mother,” a phrase that in the paradoxical vocabulary of power expresses Francis’ superiority and which has other echoes in the Franciscan tradition, in particular in Clare’s vision of sucking milk from Francis’ breast (the text translated on pp. 84-85). Like a shepherd ready to abandon the flock to save one lost sheep, Francis sets out a general order that sends each brother back to himself, only to immediately make an exception to that order by authorizing Leo to come to him if he feels it necessary.

Now it happens that at the moment he wrote this letter, Francis had just abandoned the leadership of the order, and the great ambiguity of his position is visible in the message: “he renounces power and increases his authority” (p. 373). The renunciation of 29 September 1220 was not a complete abdication, for Francis did not entirely abandon giving spiritual guidance to his brothers. Unlike an abdicating prince of the classical age (a situation recently analysed by Jacques Le Brun⁵), where absence is (as emphasized by Giorgio Agamben) the very thing that discloses the prince’s glory, Francis could not totally abandon a power that took the form of government, defined as “a power resigned in advance” (p. 360), since its full exercise is already thought of as a service. It is in this paradoxical position, the very expression of power in the medieval period, that Dalarun spots not democracy but a “democratic potential.”

⁵ Jacques Le Brun, *Le pouvoir d’abdiquer*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009.

That expression may seem surprising. A few pages later, the reluctance of Francis completely to abandon his brothers and his power is seen in the perspective of feudal relationships. According to Dalarun, Francis could not get out of his obligations to those who had demonstrated their loyalty to him. Even by referring his brothers back to their own understanding of obedience, he could not quite erase the tie that bound him to them, and his power over his brothers could not be totally abolished without abandoning the values of obedience and humility that legitimized it. Thus, governmentality, this power “that stoops, the better to embrace” (p. 398), indissolubly binds governors and governed in the same constraint.

Contrary to what the book’s subtitle suggests, Dalarun is not really offering us an “essay in medieval democracy.” He reminds us that the Middle Ages did not invent democracy, but that, especially in the Franciscan moment, it did sketch the possibility of democracy. It is certainly a fact that elections in various forms throughout the Middle Ages were not the first signs of a democratic awakening. These well-attested practices in the Middle Ages did not lead into a steady evolution towards our democracies, and we know that a society with elections by majorities is not necessarily a democratic society.⁶ Elections, deliberations, representation, and a broadened basis of power are not enough to define democracy. Should we think that the democratic potential bequeathed by the Middle Ages was power defined as serving the community, by virtue of a contract linking governors and governed? At this point the demonstration reaches its limits: the feudal relationship may serve as a cultural model for the relationship that Francis had with his brothers, but this relationship, although contractual, was still a form very distant from democracy.⁷ More convincing is the idea that democratic potential resides in the projects in which power is exercised regardless of social origin, and in accordance with each person’s competence. In fact, that is the book’s conclusion, clearly formulated at the end of the second part: “These experiences in medieval communities taught that individuals must never be confused with their status, and must never mistake themselves for their functions” (p. 278).

On this last point, continuing the dialogue with the work of Giorgio Agamben could prove to be useful. In *Opus Dei: Archeologia dell'ufficio*, Agamben shows that the religious liturgies and services of the priest constituted a perfect paradigm of human action in which

⁶ See Olivier Christin, “[The Slow Triumph of the Majority](#),” *Books & Ideas*, 11 June 2012.

⁷ On the absence of any connection between contractuality and democracy in the Middle Ages, see Alain Boureau, “Pierre de Jean Olivi et l’émergence d’une théorie contractuelle de la royauté au XIII^e siècle,” in Joël Blanchard (ed.), *Représentation, pouvoir et royauté à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Paris, Picard, 1995, pp. 165-175.

being is defined only in relation to its activity: in the liturgical act, “being and praxis, effectiveness and effect, operation and oeuvre... intertwine inseparably.”⁸ Therefore, even if in some communities there was the idea of a radical separation between being and function, we can better understand the very tenuous effect that this idea had in an institution in which the exactly opposite conception was dominant.

Jacques Dalarun’s essay offers to a very wide readership a lesson in history and in hermeneutics. He adds an element to the history of the Franciscan innovations even while taking care to immerse Francis in his time, which was less the thirteenth century than a twelfth century influenced by the Gregorian reforms of the feudal order, when new forms of power were invented in communities of monks and hermits. The reader is taken very close to the sources, into the heart of Francis’ *Spoletto Letter* in its original version, as well as into the thought of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, and is offered a history of the *conversi* and reflections on democratic government through a history of some religious communities. It would be too much to say that the lesson about the “democratic potentials” of the Middle Ages is convincing on every point, but the immense question that it raises inspires an unfinished but fertile dialogue with sources that are rarely analysed for their political meanings.

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⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Opus dei. Archéologie de l’office (Homo sacer, II, 5)*, translated into French by Martin Rueff, Paris, Seuil, 2012, p. 67. First published in Italian: *Opus Dei: Archeologia dell’ufficio (Homo sacer, II, 5)*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2012.