

Medieval Perceptions of the Individual and the Imitation of Models

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In her article “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?”, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that during the Middle Ages, theologians were not concerned with the individual in the way that “individual” is defined in modern times.¹ This modern definition stresses the uniqueness of the individual and the process of finding oneself separate from the community or the group. Conversely, the medieval meaning for the growth of the individual meant “the development of the self toward God.”² Religious thinkers of the Middle Ages were concerned with the understanding of the self primarily because the self was made in the image of God; thus, understanding oneself meant understanding God. Bynum argues, then, that the discovery of the individual that occurred in the Middle Ages was the discovery that individuals could become more like God through imitating those who already embodied God.³ Medieval theologians, like Guibert of Nogent and Bernard of Clairvaux, and theologians from late antiquity, like Augustine of Hippo, wrote religious texts that explored the search for and understanding of the individual. However, like Bynum argues, these theologians were not concerned with the individual in the modern sense. Instead, these religious thinkers emphasized the importance of understanding God through the development of the individual by way of following models who exemplified sanctity. Analyzing the works of

1 Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), 85.

2 Ibid, 87.

3 Ibid, 90.

these three theologians, I will explore how each theologian perceived the individual in the context of God, established imitation as a means to grow closer to God, and attempted to define what it meant to be a good Christian.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo recounted his life from childhood to adulthood, and more importantly, from an ignorant sinner to a sinner more aware of his sins and the source of his potential salvation. Although Augustine wrote the *Confessions* during late antiquity, prior to the Middle Ages, his collective works and his status as an important figure in the Church made it that the *Confessions* inspired the works of several medieval writers. Since Augustine himself was a model for other monks, the discussion of the *Confessions* is vital to the understanding of the subsequent religious works that were produced during the Middle Ages. Augustine opened his autobiography with the assertion that the individual was nothing without God. He wrote, “I would not exist, my God, could not exist at all, were you not already in me. Rather I could not be, were I not in you, ‘from whom, through whom, in whom are all things.’”⁴ This assertion shows Augustine’s understanding of his own life; his individual life held importance in that he was made by God and came from God. Augustine did not classify himself as unique or special. In fact, Augustine believed that it was ignorant for an individual to praise his own greatness in lieu of praising God. In describing those who practiced the physical sciences, Augustine wrote, “busy with praise of their own wisdom, they confer your attributes on themselves.”⁵ To Augustine, these scientists only knew of science because God made them, made science, and gave them the capacity to understand it. Therefore, it was foolish of them to brag of their greatness when their greatness lied in the hands of God. Although Augustine emphasized the relative unimportance of the individual unless it was to praise God’s glory, he still wrote several pages about his own life as an individual.

There were two main functions of Augustine’s *Confessions*. First, and more obviously, he described and confessed to his sins. But even more deeply, Augustine wrote the *Confessions* to set an example

4 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, ed. and trans. Garry Wills (New York and London: Penguin, 2006), 19.

5 Ibid, 89.

for other people who had the capacity to convert, like he did. Since Augustine did not believe in people's free will to make changes that could influence their lives, Augustine probably believed that the act of him sharing his story and inspiring others to convert was the predetermined work of God. In his own life, Augustine wrote about the influence that others had, through the work of God, in leading him to conversion. Augustine's contemporary, Ambrose, influenced Augustine's conversion. On meeting Ambrose, Augustine wrote, "You led me insensibly to him that he might lead me sensibly to you. He assumed a father's role toward me, to guide my wandering with a bishop's loving care."⁶ As Ambrose assumed the role of a father, Augustine assumed the role of a child, absorbing the likeness of Ambrose and slowly learning to do as he did. When Ambrose gave a sermon about the power of the symbolic meaning of the scripture in the Bible, Augustine took note. This sermon shaped Augustine's fundamental understanding of the Bible and its importance. As he continued to read the passages in the Bible, Augustine "ascribed them to an exalted symbolism, and their authority seemed... more venerable, and it earned more devoted belief."⁷ Without the model of Ambrose, Augustine may have never learned that the power of the Bible was reserved in its symbolic meaning. Through imitation of Ambrose, Augustine could form a better understanding of God and move toward identification of himself as an individual in the medieval sense.

Hundreds of years later, in a like manner to Augustine, Guibert of Nogent wrote of his life and the ways that other people helped shape him as a monastic. Guibert opened his *Monodies* with the declaration of God's greatness because of His capacity to forgive the wrongdoings of individual sinners. He wrote, "since you are the source and whatever flows from you, you owe to everyone, it is clear that you do not withhold from individuals what belongs to all."⁸ This assertion illustrated Guibert's understanding of God's role in the life of the individual. Guibert believed that all things came from God, but he differentiated the individual from others by asserting that forgiveness could be given on an individual

6 Augustine, *Confessions*, 103.

7 Ibid, 112.

8 Guibert of Nogent, *Monodies and On the Relics of the Saints*, ed. Joseph McAlhany and Jay Rubenstein (New York and London: Penguin, 2011) 4.

basis, even if it was the same form of forgiveness. However, like Augustine, Guibert could not remove his own identity from that of God. He believed that his individual importance stemmed from being made in the image of God. Guibert wrote, “I seek knowledge of you through knowledge of myself, and if I possess knowledge of you, I cannot lack knowledge of myself.”⁹ Understanding the individual was vital in understanding God because all things flowed from God, and man was made in God’s image. So, the importance of the individual relied upon the link between God and the individual.

In contrast to Augustine, Guibert was more deliberate in his intention to write his work as a guide or model for the conversion of other Christians. Throughout the *Monodies*, Guibert digressed from the discussion of himself to discuss the stories of others. Guibert’s first digression was to discuss the conversion stories he witnessed that led his mother “and many others to take up examples of change for the good.”¹⁰ Guibert recognized the importance of good models for Christians to follow, and his decision to share the stories of these already influential conversions was rooted in his belief that those who read his work could imitate the models he outlined. First, Guibert wrote of a man named Evrard, a count from the castle of Breteuil, who became pious and ran away into exile after realizing that he was succumbing to his own vices. Upon leaving behind his own worldly riches, Evrard discovered the richness of serving God. Guibert described this man as one who “emerged to awaken the minds of many.”¹¹ The presentation of the story of Evrard stood as an example for those with riches who, in Guibert’s view, could imitate the ways of Evrard. In fact, Guibert described how Evrard himself had modeled his conversion after a man named Thibaud, who used to be a nobleman but became a saint. As a man who was destined to be in the military, Thibaud ran away, rejecting the military life for working a humble occupation to support his monastery. Guibert showed how Evrard followed a model to become a more pious Christian to show how others could follow Evrard to do the same. Guibert went on to present other conversion stories, ending with the

9 Guibert, *Monodies*, 5.

10 Ibid, 21.

11 Ibid, 22.

assertion that for many noblemen, “the numerous examples all around them aroused the desire in the nobility to accept voluntary poverty.”¹² Once again, Guibert demonstrated how others who discovered the stories of converted monastics chose to mimic their actions. The underlining assumption in Guibert’s writing was that every individual had the ability to choose to follow these models.

Like Augustine and Guibert, Bernard of Clairvaux stressed the importance of following models of piety to form a better understanding of God. While Bernard emphasized that knowing oneself would improve one’s understanding of God, he also believed that it was important for the individual to recognize his own being as an example of God’s greatness. He wrote, “there are two things you should know: first, what you are; second that you are not what you are by your own power.”¹³ Bernard clearly believed that an individual could not appreciate the power of God without first understanding his own being. Moreover, Bernard believed that God gifted man with free will, the ability to choose, so that man could seek to achieve a closer identification with God. He wrote, “man’s dignity is his free will...His virtue is that by which he seeks eagerly for his Creator.”¹⁴ In this sense, Bernard emphasized the importance of the individual only because the individual possesses the ability to recognize his Creator and seek a closer relationship with his Creator. Hence, Bernard wrote his work, “On Loving God,” to provide a model that others could follow to achieve a closer relationship with God.

With the first eight chapters of “On Loving God,” Bernard established why all people, including Christians and non-believers, should love God, while in the last chapters, Bernard outlined the different levels of love that one could seek to achieve. These last chapters functioned as a step-by-step handbook for the medieval Christian or monk. An individual could potentially achieve all four levels of love if he could follow the steps that Bernard outlined. First, Bernard indicated that the first degree of love is when a person loves himself for his own sake. Bernard explicated this degree of love by quoting scripture that stated

12 Guibert, *Monodies*, 30.

13 Bernard of Clairvaux, “On Loving God,” in *Bernard of Clairvaux: The Selected Works*, ed. and trans. G.R. Evans (New York: Paulist, 1987), 176.

14 Ibid.

that man should love the people around him in the way he would love himself, which is an unselfish form of love. In the same way that the individual is important because he is made in the image of God, the first degree of love is only achieved when the individual extends his love to others and can love God within others. Thus, it is important to note that before man can love others let alone God, he must first love himself. On the second degree of love, Bernard explained that a wise man should recognize the tasks that he can achieve alone and the tasks that he can only achieve with the help of God. Thus, man should love God because God continuously helps man. With the third degree of love, man should love God because he recognizes the glory and infinite ability of God. Bernard directed his readers by saying “this love is acceptable because it is given freely.”¹⁵ Consequently, if a monk sought to reach this level of loving, he needed to follow this model and love God purely without the expectation of benefits in return. Finally, Bernard described the fourth level of loving as conforming to the will of God and rooting all affections in God. In this sense “to love in this way is to become like God.”¹⁶ Rejecting all mortal wills and desires moves one closer to God and brings him in God’s likeness because he is no longer motivated by the pleasures of the world. Hence, the final form of love is essentially an imitation of God. So, to reach the highest degree of love, one must first love himself, love his neighbor as himself, love God for His help, and then love God for His glory. Only then can an individual attempt to become more like God and achieve the final form of love.

To conclude, medieval theologians were concerned with the individual only because the individual was made in God’s image and had the capacity to form a closer bond with God and become more like God by understanding himself and developing himself toward models that embodied God. As Bynum argues, these religious thinkers stressed “individual decision, lifestyle and experience as part of a search for institutions and practices that embody these... and that the goal of development to a twelfth-century person is the application to the self of a model.”¹⁷ Once a medieval person achieved the expression of himself

15 Bernard, “On Loving God,” 194.

16 Ibid, 196.

17 Bynum, “Discover the Individual,” 108.

as the sanctified model he sought to express, he became closer to God in that he was imitating a model that was more closely imitating Him. Therefore, the overall goal was to form a better union with God and to continue to proceed towards the development of the self in the image of God. Hence, the Middle Ages was not characterized by a newfound search for the individual but by a critical search for God through the understanding and modification of the individual by way of models.