Patricia Appelbaum


As Patricia Appelbaum, an independent scholar of American religion, notes at both the beginning and the end of her book 2012 saw two major publications about Francis in English, one was my biography, the other was the appearance in English of André Vauchez’s magisterial _Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint_. Appelbaum’s _Saint Francis of America_ does something neither of our books did, examine the reception of the Little Poor Man in the United States, and it generally does so very well. This is an important book, and the story it tells is surprising, amusing, and very enlightening. The popularity of Francis seems so obvious that we take it for granted, something we should not because before 1850 Protestant Americans ignored or condemned the saint. Drawing on an extraordinarily vast, even daunting, diversity of evidence, Appelbaum's narrative is vigorous, and her analysis of the ways in which Francis has been read and contested is convincing. Although she waits until her conclusion to say it, Francis has become part of an American ‘usable past.’ What I carried away from the book was that the saint's admirers have found or created a mythic figure who most often reflects of their own desires and spirituality. Each age remakes the saint according to its own needs or hopes.

When nineteenth-century Protestants discovered Francis, it was as a true follower of Jesus in the midst of medieval religious corruption. He became a proto-Protestant. But that process took time. The _Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature_ (1870) could still denounce the saint as an unstable, immoral fraud, cynically exploited by churchman for their self-aggrandizement. Although occasionally admired as an alternative to the constricting forces of modernity and capitalism, he needed to be further detached from Catholic institutions and piety. Eventually, Renan, Oliphant, and Ruskin could admire the man from Assisi as an inspiration for their personal spirituality and art, but now as simply a Christian, not as a proto-Protestant. This romanticized Francis received scholarly support with the publication in English of Paul Sabatier’s vastly influential biography in 1894. Sabatier’s individualistic, non-doctrinal, anti-institutional Francis was a saint unburdened by popery, or rather distanced from it. Soon after 1900, Francis was discovered by the leaders of the Social Gospel Movement, in particular, Walter Rauschenbusch himself. The saint became a patron for their social criticism and their programs of uplift for the poor and marginalized. Francis would inspire social reformers of the Progressive Era as well.
Popular devotions, hymns, and even theater disseminated this Francis vogue. Paradoxically, the saint so became a fixture of sentimental devotional consumerism. In the 1920s, “Francis the Friend of Animals” appeared in countless children’s books, and the St. Francis of the bird-bath was created. Appelbaum has even managed to track down the first example of this clichéd statuette, carved for a private garden in 1924 (photo on p. 81). Its mass marking followed after the 1940. The Little Poor Man thus becomes both a critique of materialist consumerism and one of its most saleable products. This is also the age that, in reaction to the First World War and militarism generally, invented Francis the Pacifist and initiated the vogue of the pseudo-Franciscan ‘Peace Prayer,’ actually written just before World War I. Appelbaum finds its first American publication in a liberal Quaker magazine of 1927, the Friends’ Intelligencer. The result is a conflicted picture of Francis, a figure who subverts contemporary materialist and nationalist culture but, at the same time, reassures its practitioners of their own genuine piety. During the Depression only one movement, the Catholic Worker, adopted Francis as an unalloyed critic of capitalism and nationalism. By the 1930s, people of the Depression generally wanted a gentler, more affirming, domesticated Francis, if they invoked him at all. It did not help that Mussolini had chosen Francis as the patron saint of fascism. Ironically it is Il Duce’s reconstructed Assisi that is so beloved today.

Appelbaum thinks the ‘consensus culture’ of the 1950s mostly domesticated Francis, both in churchly and secular realms. This was the age of Francis the peaceful nature lover, signified by statues, bird baths, and the Peace Prayer. A few voices were raised against this non-threatening saint, mostly by historical critics. But it took the subversive sixties to turn Francis into a hero of the counter culture, of radicalism, and of dissent. Francis was invoked as the patron of the city and the ‘happening’ during San Francisco’s ‘Summer of Love’ (1967). The ‘Hippie Francis’ of Franco Zeffirelli’s film Brother Sun, Sister Moon (1973) canonized for most, in spite of its horrible critical reviews, the lovable tramp Francis. Audiences adored it. At the same time, the ecology movement rediscovered Francis the nature mystic and friend of animals.

What had previously made him attractive to children and sentimental adults now made him the hero of environmental radicalism. The author devotes an entire chapter to Francis and the development of the ‘Blessing of the Animals.’ It is fascinating reading. It is easy to forget how recent this ritual is: the first publically noticed blessing of animals of the feast of St. Francis took place only in 1985, during a liturgical extravaganza at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. The ceremony has now spread to Evangelical churches and, Appelbaum finds, to at least one Reform Jewish synagogue. This is an odd development since Francis himself forbad his followers to own pets.