

and there were historical facts which lent credence to it, along with certain internal features of the Koran itself.

As reported by Franz Babinger in his definitive biography of Mehmed the Conqueror, the Ottoman sultan who conquered Constantinople, Cusanus's study became the basis for an extraordinary peace gesture by Pope Pius II, who offered Mehmed full recognition for his sovereignty over all the lands he had conquered, provided the Turk would convert to Christianity.

I do not know of any echo or reaction in the Muslim world to Cusanus's writings seeking a common high ground and lessening of violence, or even if they were ever translated into Arabic or Turkish. In Byzantium, the *Filioque* was betrayed by an imperial court which Cusanus branded as treacherous, and was rabidly rejected by a band of Aristotelian monks led by Gennadios, later installed as patriarch of Constantinople by the victorious Mehmed the Conqueror when the city fell in 1453. In the Latin West, one Johannes Wenck wrote a bitter attack on Cusanus's first scientific masterpiece *On Learned Ignorance*. Cusanus identified this as an outburst from the dominant "Aristotelian sect" within the church. This Aristotelian sect, backed by the Venetian and other western financiers, became so predominant in the ensuing period, that the German cardinal's influence was all but silenced in the 16th century throughout the western Christian world, which had by then split along national and confessional lines as Cusanus had feared.

Glorious images of early Renaissance

by Nora Hamerman

Fra Angelico at San Marco

by William Hood

Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1993
338 pages, hardbound, \$85

Fra Angelico, the Dominican friar born Guido di Piero in Mugello and beatified officially by Pope John Paul II in 1984, was a contemporary of Nicolaus of Cusa. Professor Hood's beautiful and painstakingly researched book will satisfy many readers simply by the selection of the photographs, the care with which they were taken to reveal the architectural context of Angelico's paintings in the Dominican convent of San Marco in Florence, and the sharpness of the reproductions. The numerous images of the cloisters with their painted

decorations can only be described as stunning, but in this large book, even many comparative illustrations are reproduced in full color, making it into an accurate if partial memento of the visual beauty of the Christian humanist movement which organized the Council of Florence.

We are certainly not talking about a "coffee table book," however. The dense text will be, for nonspecialist readers, harder to get through, but William Hood has some crucial insights and information to offer to anyone who has been "bitten" by the fascination of the early Renaissance in its cradle, Florence. The theme of the book is the some 50 paintings in tempera and fresco executed by Fra Angelico and his workshop between 1438, the year of the opening of the Council of Florence, and 1452, the year before the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks. This means that the artist's activity at San Marco coincides precisely with the era of Nicolaus of Cusa's most intense diplomatic activity for the unity of Christendom.

Dominicans as papal theologians

In 1989, at the Schiller Institute's conference in Rome commemorating the 450th anniversary of the Union at the Council of Florence, this reviewer heard Cardinal Ciappi, the Theologian of the Papal Household, and I learned for the first time of the important role of the Florentine Dominican friars in organizing the Council. Sitting at the dais next to Helga Zepp-LaRouche, Cardinal Ciappi, an octogenarian, said that he had become a priest at S. Maria Novella, the Florentine church where the working sessions of the Council of Florence were held in 1438 and 1439. (Indeed, S. Maria Novella was the hub of the papacy of Eugenius IV from 1434 until 1443, when the pope was finally able to return to Rome.) Ciappi spoke of Fra Angelico the artist; of Saint Antoninus, the Dominican who became bishop of Florence in the 1440s and wrote the first treatise on a Christian outlook on the emerging "capitalist" system; and underlined that St. Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of the Dominican order in its founding century, the 1200s, had been particularly devoted to the *Filioque*.

All of this greatly impressed me, but it was not until I read William Hood's book that I realized that *all* Theologians of the Papal Household since the 13th century have been Dominicans, the popular name for the Order of Preachers founded by St. Dominic (just as the Order of Friars Minor are called Franciscans for their founder, St. Francis). Nor did I grasp the particular nature of the Dominican Observants—the reforming movement that challenged the Conventuals—in Italy in general, and in the special case of Florence. The Observants insisted on a return to the letter and spirit of the original Constitutions governing the order in the time of the founders.

Professor Hood has little to say about the Council of Florence and nothing about the world strategic situation of the time. His subject is rather enclosed within the cloistered

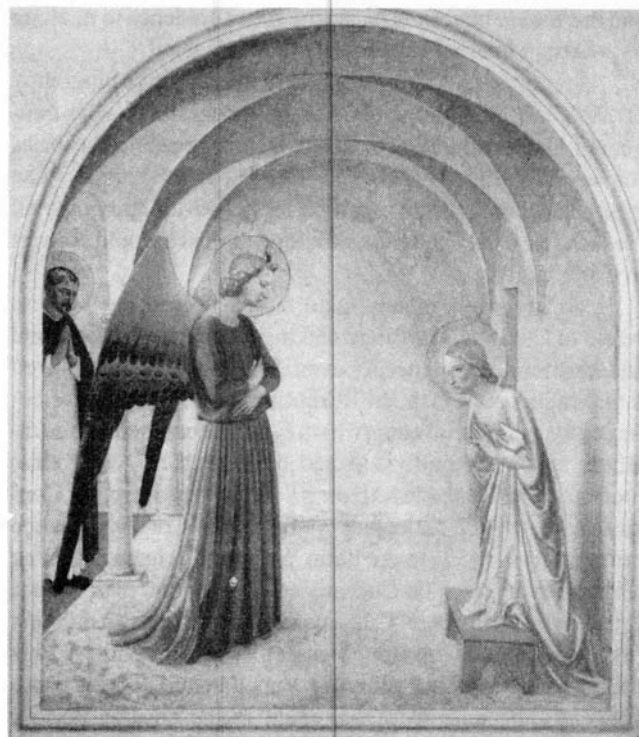
walls of San Marco. Yet San Marco was the monastery financed lavishly by Cosimo de' Medici, the papal banker, the most powerful man in Florence, and the financier of the Council, who paid the bills of the eastern prelates and potentates and their entourages. Cosimo engineered the takeover of the old monastery of San Marco in Florence by the Dominican Observants in 1436, and then arranged for it to be endowed with the greatest private library of the era—the trove of ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts which had belonged to the Florentine Platonist Niccolò Niccoli. And Fra Angelico was not merely a devout Dominican friar; he was equally, as Hood shows, a professional artist at the vanguard of his profession in a period of revolutionary breakthroughs in art, as exemplified by Masaccio, Brunelleschi, Alberti, and Donatello, to name only the most famous.

Economics of orders of friars

Particularly useful is the book's very clear discussion of the various orders of clergy, comprising monks, cathedral canons, and orders of friars—to which latter the Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites (all powerful forces in Renaissance artistic innovation) belong, as well as, later, the Jesuits. To oversimplify a much more articulated discussion, the monks are attached to the land and their abbot, the canons are responsible through a local hierarchy to a local bishop and through him to the pope, but the orders of friars were like mobile strike-forces, to use a modern term, which could be deployed directly by the pope for special tasks for which the monks and canons were poorly suited: such as evangelizing the urban poor or combatting gnostic heresies. The friars arose only in the 13th century as a new phenomenon, contemporary with the burst of population growth and the development of urban culture in key parts of western Europe.

According to Hood, the “mendicant” friars (only a very few radical Franciscans actually went so far as to beg for their meals) interpreted the vow of poverty for themselves and their orders to mean detachment from the fixed incomes of ground-rent which characterized both monastic wealth and traditional benefices, or church livings, and the need for the religious to support their physical existence in other ways. This intention was renewed through the various Observant wings of the friars in the 15th century. Hood's focus is the Dominican Observance in Fiesole and Florence, founded in 1406 by Fra Giovanni Dominici, a reformer who became a cardinal and was the head of the Dominican Observants in Italy.

This could mean “fundraising” from wealthy patrons like the Medici. Or it could mean that the less-learned friars mastered a craft and made a living which supported their brothers. This was the case for the artist Fra Angelico and his brother Benedetto, a talented scribe, who not only created manuscripts and paintings for the Dominican order, but could support a community of 20 monks with the income they derived from selling the products of their labor! It is quite obvious that this change in the economic basis of a religious

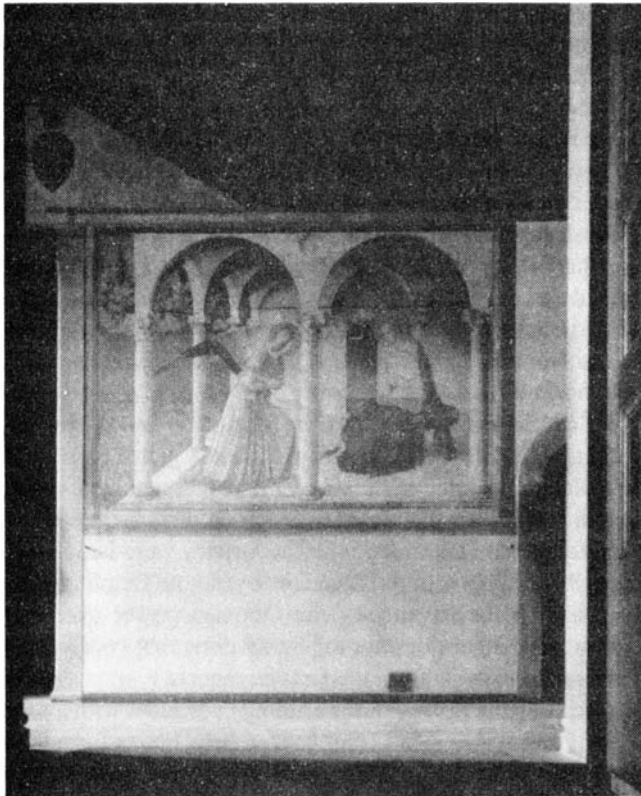


Fra Angelico's Annunciation fresco in Cell 3 of the Dominican monastery of San Marco.

order implies a change in its social basis and mode of thinking.

By no means was this revolutionary change limited to one order or even to a kind of order. Professor Hood does not say so, but one cannot help but be struck by the way in which a movement which became Renaissance Christian humanism cut across the boundaries of traditional orders, and even across the divisions between monks, canons, and friars. For example, as he reports, Don Lorenzo Monaco (“Lawrence the Monk”), a manuscript illuminator and painter of altarpieces whose work looked forward to that of Angelico in many ways, was a member of the same reform current in the Camaldolite order of Benedictine monks as was Ambrogio Traversari, the actual organizer of the Council of Florence, and a remarkable Christian Platonist thinker. Fra Filippo Lippi, one of the first ranking artists of the early Renaissance, and a personality very different from Fra Angelico, was a Carmelite friar; his order had been in the vanguard of commissioning art from the revolutionary young artist Masaccio in the 1420s.

Or, to take this outside the context of religious orders, look at the collaboration between canons, such as Nicolaus of Cusa and Leon Battista Alberti; monks, such as Traversari and Lorenzo Monaco; friars, such as St. Bernardino and St. Antoninus, both innovative economic thinkers, both present at the Council of Florence; artist-friars, such as Fra Filippo



This photo shows the Annunciation fresco in the north dormitory of San Marco, "neatly inserted into the wall opposite the staircase," says Hood. "The visitor to San Marco is often struck by the painting's uncanny presence, which is like sculpture, and by the intuition that the fresco's design is somehow embedded in the architecture itself."

Lippi and Fra Angelico; and individuals outside holy orders, such as the artists Brunelleschi and Donatello, the banker Cosimo de' Medici, the physician and cartographer Paolo Toscanelli, and the poet-diplomat Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, who only became a priest after 1440. Isn't what these men had in common more significant than what differentiated them—though obviously, we want to know about the distinctions, too?

Role of St. Catherine of Siena

Hood discusses a remarkable woman, Catherine Benincasa of Siena, who dared to scold popes, and who was canonized a saint by another great Siennese, Pope Pius II, in 1461. St. Catherine of Siena, an unlettered woman who dictated her inspirations and died at the age of only 33, was pronounced a doctor of the Church in 1970. The book makes it clear how much St. Catherine's ideas influenced, indeed, created, the Florentine Dominican Observance, which had many parallels to the Brotherhood of the Common Life flourishing at the same time in northern Europe. One almost suspects that her influence over the Council of Florence has been drastically underestimated.

I would not like to leave the impression that *Fra Angelico at San Marco* is only about the themes I have mentioned here. Much of the book is spent on the friar's contribution to the formal development of the altarpiece and to the history of painting technique, embodied in his "color modeling," and even more time is spent on the peculiarly *liturgical* as opposed to *narrative* character of Dominican religious painting, which sets it in contrast to that of the Franciscan order. Although Professor Hood seems unwilling to directly challenge any of the current intellectual fashions, he does state, perhaps with a touch of irony, that one of the most celebrated of Fra Angelico's achievements in the San Marco cloister, the *Annunciation* in the north dormitory, resists "deconstruction." (One has to ask, can other Fra Angelico works be subjected to deconstruction? Is it politically incorrect at Oberlin College, where Professor Hood teaches, to fail to bow to the tyrant's hat of Deconstructionism?)

Angelico's Annunciation frescoes

The theme of the Annunciation was a favorite of Florentine artists, and Angelico was responsible for setting the model for Florentine paintings of this subject after the mid-15th century. March 25, the feast of the Annunciation, was celebrated in Florence as the first day of the new year. Hood devotes considerable analysis to the north corridor *Annunciation*, pointing out that it was in a relatively public position and addressed to a wider public than the friars alone, and is "flooded by an apparently invisible light source when one first confronts the *Annunciation* from the staircase" (see illustration p. 59). As he shows with a detailed analysis of the order in which the wall was frescoed and its perspectival construction, the painting does not yield a perfect example of one-point perspective, the great scientific innovation of the early Florentine Renaissance, and yet it fits so perfectly into its architectural setting that as Hood asserts, the "design would have been almost inconceivable without his acquaintance with architectural proportion as it was used in the new styles of Brunelleschi, Michelozzo, and Alberti." Thus, Angelico succeeded in showing the house of the Virgin at Nazareth and at the same time the house of the Dominican friars at San Marco, as if they were almost the same, situating "the mystery of Christ's Incarnation in a representation of the phenomenal world." An inscription on the painting instructs the viewer to say "Ave" in contemplating the image and to genuflect. In all these ways the beholder is drawn into the sacred colloquy and becomes "a living witness of salvation history." There is much, much more, but I leave this to the reader's anticipation.

The north corridor fresco forms a most intriguing contrast to another frescoed *Annunciation*, in Cell 3 of the cloister, which the author rightly proclaims one of Angelico's masterpieces and illustrates on the dust jacket (see p. 58). In this version, intended for the private contemplation of Dominican clerics, the scene has been radically emptied of the narrative

content (carpet of flowers, window, bedchamber seen through a doorway behind the Virgin, etc.) and instead a Dominican Saint, Peter Martyr is shown at one side worshipping the Annunciate Virgin as an exemplar for how the monks were to pray. Angelico used the natural light of the cloister to cause the Virgin to cast a shadow on the wall behind her. The painting, except for Peter Martyr, is entirely composed of "sunrise" pale colors, "like looking at nature reflected in a pearl." The conversation between Mary and the angel appears to have been finished and the two gaze lovingly at each other.

Most amazing of all, Fra Angelico left the underdrawing in the figure of the Virgin purposefully visible. In coaxing such beauty from the paint itself, instead of the fashionable use of expensive colors ground from semiprecious stones (as he himself often used for altarpieces), Fra Angelico not only obeyed the condition of poverty of the Dominican Observance, but heralded the outlook of a Leonardo da Vinci, who insisted on the principle that beauty in painting is created exclusively by the mind of the painter, operating through his hand.

Now in paper: classic study of 'The Turk'

by Nora Hamerman

Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time

by Franz Babinger; edited by William C. Hickman, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim
Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1992
508 pages, paperbound, \$19.95

Franz Babinger's *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time* is the definitive scholarly biography of the Ottoman emperor who conquered Constantinople in 1453. Babinger was a German Orientologist who knew the Turkish language and had delved deeply into the original documents. He died in 1967 while in the midst of preparing the Italian edition of this, his most important book, without supplying the footnotes for which he had provided numbers but not references. The Princeton 1978 edition, which just became available in paperback, does have footnotes which were supplied posthumously by the editors and translator.

Babinger's account, first published in German in 1953, has been criticized by Turkish scholars, for its failure to take into account many original sources, yet there is no comparable study of this scope available in English, and so it remains

the best starting-point for anyone wishing to understand what was the Ottoman Empire of the 15th century, and why western Europeans saw it as such a threat.

Babinger was not anti-Turkish. With considerable irony he points out that there were western "Christian" rulers, such as Ferrante of Naples, whose arbitrary and brutal cruelty rivaled in style (if not in scale) that of Mehmed II and other Turkish rulers. While Mehmed II was regarded as the devil incarnate in the West, in Turkey he was (and is to this day) considered a great national hero. Babinger notes that many of the peoples subjected by the Ottomans were at least initially, no worse off than they had been under the Byzantines, and in some cases, slightly better off.

Most important, perhaps, he also documents in overwhelming detail the evidence that Genoa and Venice, the two oligarchical and nominally Christian "republics" of the Italian peninsula which ruled overseas empires in the eastern Mediterranean and traded with the Orient, were largely responsible, along with the decadent Byzantine Empire itself, for assuring the advance of the Ottoman power over that region. (Babinger does not explicitly draw that conclusion, but it is inescapable from the facts he reports.)

Reading the history of the Ottoman advances with a map of the Balkans in mind, one cannot help but sadly reflect on the historical roots of the present-day carnage in former Yugoslavia in the wars of "religion" which were conducted cold-bloodedly at the behest of Venetian, Genoese, and yes, also Florentine banking-houses. It may be necessary to underline the point, since to this day, confessional dividing-lines are being manipulated in the Balkans especially to justify genocide—especially against Bosnians of the Muslim faith, and especially by the British, who later dismantled the decaying Ottoman Empire with false righteous indignation, the better to construct their own evil empire.

Oppressive and inhuman regime

The culpability of these western bankers, and the outrage later expressed against them by Pope Pius II, the close friend of Nicolaus of Cusa, is underscored when one confronts the hideous oppressiveness of the Ottoman Turkish system, which took over most of the backward traits of the Byzantine despotism, and added its own inhuman practices. Some examples:

- The fratricide law. Mehmed II the Conqueror, in 1451, two years before the fall of Constantinople, celebrated his accession to power by killing all of his brothers (a considerable number, because of the practice of multiple wives and concubines, who were mostly Christian or of other non-Muslim faiths). This inaugurated the law by which all threats to the succession by rival brothers were snuffed out by the new sultan on the day of taking power. (p. 65)

- Ritual human sacrifice. This was, of course, not Muslim tradition, but it did belong to ancient Turkish religious practices, pre-dating their conversion to Islam. Mehmed's