Marvin Becker’s *Medieval Italy* is the latest entry in the increasingly sophisticated enterprise to explicate the remarkable phenomenon of the Italian Renaissance. As in his earlier, two-volume study, *Florence in Transition*, and his numerous articles on individual themes, Becker has identified the development of a mentalité, a set of psychological conditions, as the central element in understanding how the world was changed in Italy, sometime around 1300, from something recognizably “Medieval” to something clearly Renaissance. Specifically, in this case, the author steps back into Medieval Italy to investigate the seeds of that new Renaissance psychology and discovers that “what emerged in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was a change of mentality” (178). Charting that change and identifying its causes and effects constitutes Becker’s study.

The operative aspect of this change is identified by Becker with the emergence of a sophisticated system of public and private credit and the attendant abstract bonds among the merchant citizens of the Italian communes. In other words, this single example — the rise of credit and funded public debts — implies a new psychological as well as a new social and economic order.

The factors that supported and permitted this shift from an early Medieval, or “archaic,” world in which ties and relationships were literal and ritualistic were many and complex. In religion, the change was closely associated with the rise of movements of popular piety (some heretical) and the new mendicant religious orders, especially the Franciscans. God ceased to be a great chieftain to be propitiated by gift-giving and formal ritual; He became a partner in the experience of the urban lay merchant: “religion followed the exchange system in many of its particulars” (6). Consequently, the so often noted invocation “To God and My Profit” that appeared in the account ledgers of the merchants of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance takes on a new significance, a deeper meaning in our attempts to enter the mind-set of that society.

Similarly, the renewed emphasis on the spiritual experience of the layman encouraged them to see themselves as sharers in Christ’s suffering and passion, resulting in the formation of lay confraternities and flagellant societies. Also, this new religious impulse manifested itself civically in the new patterns of public charity and bequests in which Christ’s love for mankind was shared through the feeding, clothing and succouring of His poor in the community. The bonds that allowed merchants to establish the psychological preconditions for a credit economy and the abstract ties of affective and communal interdependence also helped form that critical aspect of the Renaissance in Florence: the *vita civile*.
This shift in religious orientation away from the ritualistic, gift-giving practices of the early Middle Ages led to a decline in the literalness of man’s relations with God and His fellows. The Italian urban layman accepted a greater degree of personal spiritual responsibility for himself and his community; he became more active in civic good works, initially founding hospitals, providing dowries for poor girls or performing corporal acts of charity through a confraternity, and, eventually, by extension taking part in the civic life of the commune, contributing to the public purse, establishing the Monte delle Doti and recognizing the existence of the greatest of all abstractions, the State. Ritual survived to be sure (cf. R. Trexler’s Public Life in Renaissance Florence), but in a more institutionalized, vestigial way. The new “animating myth” of the urban layman was active participation and shared experience.

Implied also in this psychological revolution is a greater sense of physical and social security. Life became less precarious; hence, confidence in the future permitted men to speculate on future gains, to accept the idea that society can be changed or improved over time, and to recognize that causes have effects that are if not predictable at least possible.

Obviously, these developments greatly affected the citizen’s response to his city and his material and spiritual economy. However, it also profoundly affected his personal sense of self; and the manifestations of this confidence were soon exhibited everywhere in new literary models, in art and in architecture. The role of the consorteria declined in favour of the more immediate family. The lives of common men and women of the urban laity took on a greater importance to the detriment of the rural knightly classes. Laymen more often were made saints, governments increasingly became a shared responsibility, credit became a form of societal glue rather than merely usury or exploitation.

It should be evident, then, that Marvin Becker’s book is stimulating and provocative. It attempts to confront those areas outside traditional history that all scholars recognize as significant while still not floating into the fantasy world of psycho-history. For such a study there are no reliable sources, only lines to be read between and motives to be reconstructed. Intellectual history of this kind is surely the most difficult; but it is equally rewarding in offering tentative suggestions about the mentality of a period in which some concept of a collective psychology is a critical element in its definition, even its self-definition.

There are times when the reader would prefer more substance, clearer, more concrete examples, fewer words and more tangible facts. Also, there are occasions when the repetitions — in some cases almost identical passages (cf. pp. 139 and 148 on Joachim of Fiore) — detract from the analysis and imply poor editing. However, as a stimulant to thought the book is admirable and its flaws result more from the nature of the questions under investigation than from the author’s judgement.

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