

Concerns about Bishop Stephen Robson's Dissertation on Bernard of Clairvaux

P. ALKUIN SCHACHENMAYR O.CIST.

Introduction

Stephen Robson's dissertation on St. Bernard, titled "With the Spirit and Power of Elijah (Lk 1,17). The Prophetic-Reforming Spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux as Evidenced Particularly in his Letters"¹, was accepted in 2003 by the Gregorian University in Rome. Its scholarly qualities were considered exceptional, leading to a nomination for that year's Premio Bellarmino (Bellarmino Prize). This prize is given to the two best dissertations of the year; a jury of five, led by the Vice Rector for Academics, determines who will receive it. The awards ceremony takes place at annual large-scale university festivities, designed to acknowledge academic excellence and encourage emulation from other doctoral students². Finally, the dissertation was included in 2004 as a monograph in the *Analecta Gregoriana* series, published by the Gregorian University's own publishing house, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana.

Robson's elevation to the episcopacy in 2012 and his installation as the Bishop of Dunkeld (Scotland) in 2014 were consistent with these academic accolades. It seemed all the more pleasing to those working in Cistercian Studies that Robson had been distinguished for his work on St. Bernard, not only by his doctoral commission, but also by the high-ranking prize jury, and then by the acquisitions editors at the prestigious Jesuit publishing house.

His dissertation consists of four chapters which cover vast terrain, starting with the Old Testament and going up to Bernard Lonergan's and Rudolf Bultmann's methodologies for theological text interpretation. In between we have Bernardine biography, ecclesiastical history, monastic theories of community, and spirituality for today, among several further topics. The work is in no way limited to Bernard's letters, as the title would suggest. Robson also makes extensive

1 *Analecta Gregoriana* 293, Series Facultatis Theologiae, Sectio B107, Rome 2004.

2 Pontificia Università Gregoriana, *Ordo Anni Academici 2019–2020* (Rome 2019) 106–107.

reference to the famous abbot's sermons and treatises. The body of the dissertation encompasses more than 400 pages; add to that a 67-page bibliography and three appendices, and the dissertation amounts to a sum total of 514 pages.

Of the three reviews of the dissertation's published version known to me, two make it clear that the book does not merit an award of excellence. While John Sommerfeldt (University of Dallas, Irving) commended certain passages, he called the work "superficial", at times "grossly inadequate", and complained of its "painfully off-putting style" because it is written in "classic dissertationese"³. Robert Swanson (University of Birmingham, UK) took a more muted stance and noted that because of "its somewhat laboured style, and fragmented organisation, this is not an easy volume to digest."⁴ The third, written by Father Paul Haffner, a long-time lecturer at the Gregoriana and tenured professor at the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum in Rome, found it to be "really an excellent book [...] not dry and dusty, but very readable, as well as being scholarly and informed."⁵ This last reviewer, writing for the Gregorian's own journal, is presumably an acquaintance of Robson's, since both are English clerics who were active at the Gregoriana at the same time⁶; he misspells "Profetic" and "as evidence particularly" in the title of the review.

What none of the reviews mention is that there seem to be dozens of passages in Robson's dissertation which are apparently identical or remarkably similar to texts published by other scholars, yet the author does not attribute these sources.

Footnotes as Camouflage

The following table shows a passage from Robson that seems identical to Bruno James' commentary in his edition of Bernard's letters⁷. James' commentary has no footnotes, while Robson has inserted the footnotes numbered 218–221; oddly enough, Robson's footnotes make no reference to Bruno James. They refer either to St. Bernard's letters or secondary literature by other authors, giving

3 John SOMMERFELDT, Book Review. *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 40.4 (2005) 442-444.

4 R. N. SWANSON, Book Review. *The Heythrop Journal* 48.6 (2007) 997–998, here 998.

5 Paul HAFFNER, Book Review. *Gregorianum* 86 (2005) 914–915, here 915.

6 Paul Michael HAFFNER, Curriculum Vitae. <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/3600971/curriculum-vitae-rev-dr-paul-michael-haffner> [3.8.2019].

7 The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Newly translated by Bruno Scott JAMES (Chicago 1953).

page-ranges and therefore not making any specific citation. Indeed, the absence of quotation marks makes it impossible for the reader to know that the text overlaps with Robson's.

ROBSON, Spirit (cit. n. 1) 248–249	JAMES, Letters (cit. n. 7) 260
<p>The case was heard in Rome during March 1142. The evidence was strong against the Archbishop-elect, but the case broke down because the canons of the Church forbade the acceptance of second-hand evidence²¹⁸ as grounds for proceeding against anyone. Pope Innocent II wrote to England commanding the opponents of the election²¹⁹ to come to Rome in person the following year, 1143. On this occasion, no settlement ensued either, as William Fitzherbert had appealed to the testimony of William of St Barbe, Dean of York²²⁰, who was not present to give testimony. The case was therefore referred back to England, and the Pope made his approval of the election contingent on William of St Barbe undertaking to swear that no pressure had been brought to bear on the Chapter by the King's men²²¹.</p>	<p>The case was heard in Rome during March, 1142. The evidence was strong against the archbishop-elect, but the case broke down because the canons of the Church forbade the acceptance of secondhand evidence as grounds for proceeding against anyone. Pope Innocent II packed the litigants back to England, and ordered the principals to come in person to Rome the following year on the third Sunday in Lent. [...] Both parties arrived in Rome for the final hearing of the case on March 7th, 1143. But no settlement ensued, as William Fitzherbert appealed to the testimony of William of St. Barbe, Dean of York, who was not present in Rome. The case was therefore referred back to England, and the Pope made his approval of the election contingent on William of St. Barbe undertaking to swear that pressure had not been brought to bear upon the Chapter by the king's men.</p>

These texts are extremely similar and contain several long phrases that are identical. James' book predates Robson by 50 years. Even if Robson added footnotes to a pre-existent text, that does not take away his obligation to reference the original author.

Instrumentalizing Leclercq

Although Jean Leclercq is cited often in Robson's dissertation, it seems that he uses more of the master's texts than he admits; parallels to Leclercq's classic monograph "Love of Learning"⁸ appear regularly. The following passage shows very strong parallels, similarities which could hardly have come about coinci-

8 Jean LECLERCQ, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God. A Study of Monastic Culture*, translated by Catharine MISRAHI (New York '1961).

dentally, yet the recipient of the Bellarmine Prize makes no reference to a secondary source.

ROBSON, <i>Spirit</i> (cit. n. 1) 83	LECLERCQ, <i>Love of Learning</i> (cit. n. 8) 154
By 'spiritual experience' here, we mean that in study and in reflection, importance is granted to the inner illumination of which Origen and Gregory the Great had spoken so often.	The word experience [...] simply means that, in study and in reflection, importance was granted to the inner illumination of which Origen and St. Gregory spoke so often [...].

The reference to writings by two great theologians of antiquity (Origen and Gregory) gives the impression that the doctoral candidate has read these authors, yet he cites neither them nor Leclercq.

There are many passages like the one above in this dissertation; the voice is clearly that of Leclercq, yet Robson does not attribute the texts to him. The following is one of several examples:

ROBSON, <i>Spirit</i> (cit. n. 1) 81, n. 25	LECLERCQ, <i>Love of Learning</i> (cit. n. 8) 154
Monastic literature is a literature of silence, and so monastic life is designed to give silence preference among the monk's ascetic practices. However, the literature of silence is paradoxically expressed in a written style. So in the monastery monks write because they do not talk, they write to avoid speaking. Their works accordingly take on a more pronounced literary quality. For example, sermons were often written but not delivered, and were often intended rather for private or public reading aloud. Consequently, in the Middle Ages the art of speaking (rhetoric) is applied to letters and sermons.	Their literature of silence is therefore expressed in a written rather than an oral style [...] In the monastery, on the contrary, they write because they do not talk, they write to avoid speaking. Their works accordingly take on a more highly fashioned and literary quality. [...] If discourses or sermons are composed, they are often works of "written rhetoric." These sermons, which were not delivered and never would be, were intended for public or private reading, aloud in both cases.

Other passages show that the Gregorian doctoral candidate is familiar with principles of citation and uses them extensively. His proficiency makes it hard to understand why he would not cite all of his sources. Lahusen introduced the term *pawn sacrifice* (Bauernopfer-Referenz) to explain such phenomena. He explained it as follows: "The author of record cites a small part as the product of someone else's intellectual work, in order to make the rest of the text look all the more like his own."⁹ Citing some sources with apparently great vigilance can be

9 The above is my translation of "Ein kleiner Teil wird als Ergebnis fremder Geistestätig-

used as a way of distracting the reader from the fact that other passages are not properly cited. To show how well he can cite, Robson once paraphrases Gilson (“Cistercians had ‘renounced everything except the art of writing well’”) and then goes on cite not only the source, but also the slightly different formulation used in the American translation of Gilson’s book. It seems that the doctoral candidate did not always apply this level of precision¹⁰.

Similarities to Uncited Sources

When authors make conscious use of such pawn sacrifices, it is likely that other segments of their work will be identical to other sources, yet without citing them. That seems to be the case in the following passage of the dissertation, in which Robson seems to be remarkably close to Friedrich Kempf’s chapter in Hubert Jedin’s well-known, multi-volume manual of church history¹¹.

ROBSON, Spirit (cit. n. 1) 111	KEMPF, New Relationship (cit. n. 11) 436.
This hierarchical principle of the reform had to do, not with the Church such as we understand her today as an institution distinct from state and society, but with the <i>ecclesia universalis</i> inherited from the early middle ages and including Church, state and society viewed as an amalgam. The Gregorian reformers clung throughout to this political and structural unity, but in it they sought to bring its religious nature to full prominence. According to the inner logic of the principle, since priests were responsible for religious matters, the reformers demanded that the <i>sacerdotium</i> , through its	The hierarchical principle of the reform had to do, not with the Church such as we understand her today as an institution distinct from state and society, but with the <i>ecclesia universalis</i> coming down from the early Middle Ages and including state and society. The reformers clung throughout to this religious and political structural unity, but in it they sought to bring

keit gekennzeichnet, damit die Eigenautorschaft Schwintowskis [des Verfassers] hinsichtlich des übrigen Textes umso plausibler wird.” Benjamin LAHUSEN, Goldene Zeiten: Anmerkungen zu Hans-Peter Schwintowski, Juristische Methodenlehre, UTB basics Recht und Wirtschaft 2005. *Kritische Justiz* 39.4 (2006) 398–417, here 405, referenced in Debora WEBER-WULFF, False Feathers. A Perspective on Academic Plagiarism (Berlin 2014) 10.

10 ROBSON, Spirit (cit. n. 1) 82, n. 29.

11 Friedrich KEMPF, The New Relationship of the Church to Western Christendom, in: The Church in the Age of Feudalism, Handbook of Church History, ed. by Hubert JEDIN–John DOLAN, translated by Anselm BIGGS (New York 1969) 3 436–445.

hierarchical summit the Pope, should lead the Christian world ¹⁶⁵ .	eventually to full prominence the aspect of religious value. And since priests were responsible for religious matters, they demanded that the <i>Sacerdotium</i> , through its hierarchical summit, the Pope, should lead the Christian world.
<p>165 See: C. VAN DE WIEL, <i>History of Canon Law...</i>, pp.76-81; also, J. GAUDEMET, <i>Storia del Diritto Canonico...</i>, pp.370-379; see also, M. PARISSÉ, 'Riforma Gregoriana', in <i>DEM</i>, pp.1622-1623.</p>	

While using no quotation marks, the doctoral student presents a text that seems to be largely identical to Friedrich Kempf's text. Robson's footnote 165 makes mention of only generally comparable literature, referring in one case to a multi-page section, not a specific passage, and referencing Italian publications in the other two cases. Ignoring Kempf here and in the general bibliography raises questions about Robson's research practices.

Misuse of the "see also" Device

In the following example, Robson explicitly refers to Bartlett, but not as the source of his text. He refers the reader to Bartlett for what is meant to look like further exploration of a research topic. Yet Robson's and Bartlett's texts seem to be largely identical. In fact, two full sentences correspond exactly.

ROBSON , Spirit (cit. n. 1) 112	BARTLETT , Making of Europe (cit. n. 12) 243-244
<p>Thus with increasing power and frequency, papal decisions became more easily enforceable, ritual uniformity more real. One consequence was that Latin Christians identified themselves more often and more deeply with reverence to St. Peter and his Successor. He who steered the course of the Holy Roman Church (<i>Sancta Romana Ecclesia</i>) could legitimately demand the obedience of the Christian people (<i>populus Christianus</i>), including the ruling aristocracy. R. Bartlett has further contended [...] ¹⁶⁷.</p> <p>¹⁶⁷ [...] see also the discussion in, R. BARTLETT, <i>The Making of Europe ...</i>, pp.245-250.</p>	<p>[...] papal power became greater, papal decisions more enforceable, ritual uniformity more real. One consequence was that Latin Christians identified themselves more often and more deeply as such. Reverence to St Peter, obedience to the pope [...] intensified. [...] He who steered the course of 'the Holy Roman Church' (<i>sancta Romana ecclesia</i>) could legitimately demand the obedience of 'the Christian people' (<i>populus christianus</i>), and the <i>populus christianus</i> increasingly thought of itself as such.</p>

At the end of the fragment, we find an in-line mention of Bartlett¹² and another in the footnote, yet both are pawn sacrifices using a “see also” phrase. Robson never refers to the pages on which Bartlett’s sentences are actually to be found, referring instead to a five-pages-long range in which the sentences do not appear.

Redundancy

While working on a serious and protracted project like a dissertation on St. Bernard, any writer might forget having made a point already, and thus repeat it. Yet it would be rather unlikely for him to use exactly the same sequence of words that he had written days, weeks or months before. In the following examples, Robson repeats several passages verbatim. Some of them consist of more than 20 words in identical sequence.

ROBSON, Spirit (cit. n. 1) 310	ROBSON, Spirit (cit. n. 1) 191
<p>[...] Bernard had gradually developed a network of friends and influential people, and used that influence on numerous occasions. These friends channelled information into Bernard’s monasteries concerning crises and problems, and provided the necessary communication, fellowship and assistance to him as he worked, most often with others, to resolve them.</p>	<p>[...] Bernard [...] gradually developed a network of friends and influential people, and used that influence to further his intentions. These friends channelled information concerning crises and problems into Bernard’s monasteries, and provided the necessary fellowship and assistance to Bernard and the monks as they worked to resolve them.</p>

and...

ROBSON, Spirit (cit. n. 1) 311	ROBSON, Spirit (cit. n. 1) 75
<p>During the thirty-eight years of his abbatial ministry, then, Bernard had a profound effect on the fortunes of the Cistercian renewal, on the aims and implementation of the aims of the ‘Gregorian’ reformed papacy and episcopacy, and on the moral lives of many of Europe’s secular leaders.</p>	<p>During the following thirty-eight years Bernard’s abbatial ministry was to have a profound effect on the fortunes of the Cistercian renewal, on the aims and implementation of the ‘Gregorian’ reforms in the papacy and episcopacy, and on the moral lives of many of Europe’s secular leaders.</p>

12 Robert BARTLETT, *The Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (Princeton 1993).

It is difficult to believe that the author composed these passages independently of another. It is much more likely that by using the “copy” and “paste” functions of his word processor, such redundancies came about. Since this dissertation is so long in the first place, the repeated sections become particularly taxing. It is disconcerting that neither the dissertation reviewers nor the editors of the *Analecta Gregoriana* series objected to them. Nor, for that matter, do the book reviews draw attention to them.

Conclusion

In the interest of space and time, I will stop here. There would be many more passages that need closer consideration if Robson is to maintain unquestioned standing as a prize-crowned alumnus of the Gregorian. More parallels are waiting in a comparison to Bernard Lonergan’s “Method in Theology”¹³, James Brundage’s essay on Bernard and canon lawyers¹⁴, and Hans-Dieter Kahl’s publication on Bernard’s crusade eschatology¹⁵. Even a book published by the reviewer John Sommerfeldt¹⁶ seems to have some identical texts in common with Robson:

ROBSON, Spirit (cit. n. 1) 147	SOMMERFELDT, Bernard on Relationship (cit. n. 13) 13–14
Bernard was a monk whose joy in the monastic profession was contagious ³⁰⁰ and which was a result of his conviction that he was following the counsel of Christ: ‘sell what you have and come follow me’ (Mt 19, 21).	Bernard is a monk, and his joy in his monastic profession is infectious, indeed contagious: [...] the result of his conviction that in it one follows the counsel of Christ to “sell what you have ... and come follow me.”

In the left column, Fn. 300 makes reference only to Bernard editions, but there is no mention of John Sommerfeldt as a source.

-
- 13 Bernard LONERGAN, *Method in Theology* (London 1972).
 - 14 James BRUNDAGE, *St. Bernard and the Jurists*, in: *The Second Crusade and the Cistercians*, ed. by Michael GERVERS (New York 1992) 25–33, doi: 10.1007/978-1-137-06864-4_3 [2.8.2019].
 - 15 Hans-Dieter KAHL, *Crusade Eschatology as seen by St. Bernard in the Years 1146 to 1148*, in: *Second Crusade and Cistercians* (cit. n. 14) 35–47, doi: 10.1007/978-1-137-06864-4_4 [2.8.2019].
 - 16 John R. SOMMERFELDT, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Spirituality of Relationship* (New York 2004).

Robson writes at the beginning of his book that the writing process was “an exercise in personal formation”, indeed, it “called for gifts of creativity and curiosity, not to mention tenacity and perseverance”¹⁷. Fr. Herbert Alphonso SJ (1930–2012) served as his advisor and Donna Orsuto served as Second Reader, both of them professors at the Gregorian who held (or hold) other leadership positions in the church. It would have been their responsibility to identify and address the problems portrayed above. Bishop Robson claims to have worked in a manner he learned at the Gregorian: “We have approached our subject from within the interdisciplinary methodology of the Pontifical Gregorian University Institute of Spirituality. [...] we have tried in our methodology to be rigorously scientific.”¹⁸ One must ask whether the jury responsible for awards of excellence at the Gregorian succeeded in identifying one of the institution’s best dissertations of 2003.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Michael Dougherty and Debora Weber-Wulff for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this essay.

17 ROBSON, *Spirit* (cit. n. 1) 7.

18 ROBSON, *Spirit* (cit. n. 1) 359.