

Forms of Faith in 16th-Century Italy

Review Number:

883

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 April, 2010

Editor:

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ISBN:

9780754665557

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

274pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Aldershot

Reviewer:

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The later 16th century in Italy was a period of 'mental stagnation' wrote G. R. Elton.⁽¹⁾ This highly questionable statement apparently set in motion the entire research project from which the present group of essays emerged (p. 76, n. 64); they contest its validity. Elton was far from alone in taking such a view; there have been scholars from very different backgrounds who have wished to portray the Tridentine church as a hugely successful negative force, suppressing intellectual and creative activity.⁽²⁾ It is not easy to separate out the strands from which such views were developed, in order to be able to scrutinize their truth. Even for those who dispute 'mental stagnation' it may still be so present as an idea that when they uncover creativity they immediately think that what they are discovering is 'resistance'. But can the Catholic Church, even after Trent, be understood as a monolithic entity (an idea which Catholics themselves have often been happy to accept), proclaiming a consistent and agreed program of theory and practice? Any possibility of compromise with the Protestants may have disappeared in the early 1540s, and the Catholic Church proceeded to define its own positions on the central matters under dispute, but is it credible to equate the rejection of Protestantism with the creation of a frozen orthodoxy? Do we not, throughout the 16th century, come up against arguments and disputes, ranging from issues of discipline to those of dogma, between groups within the Catholic Church? And if there were such disputes and disagreements within the Church, what did that mean for the ability of the Church to control thought and cultural activity in a more general way?

The purpose of this book of essays, based on contributions to a conference held in 2007 at the University of Leeds, is to contribute to 'rethinking the experience of an "Italian Reformation"' (p. 1). The two editors are lecturers in Italian: Abigail Brundin at Cambridge and Matthew Treherne at Leeds. The method they propose to adopt is to examine works of religious art – paintings, poems, prose works, music – as indicators of the

intellectual and creative currents active in the spiritual and religious life of the time. The idea is that by this means stories can emerge that are different from those told by 'official doctrine and decrees' (p. 2).

One historiographical debate that has focused attention on the issues around an 'Italian Reformation' has been, of course, the issue of the choice of an appropriate name. In the introduction to the present volume, the different names are reviewed: 'Italian Reformation, Catholic Reformation, Counter-Reformation, evangelism ...' (p. 3). None of them are found entirely satisfactory and what is asked for instead is a term that 'suggests a distinct Italian experience of reform, taking place both within and outside the Catholic establishment, both before and after agreement with the Protestant reformers was still held to be a possibility, at the level of official doctrine and also, crucially, at the level of popular piety and vernacular cultural practice' (p. 3). But no such term is forthcoming. The key word here is 'reform'; and this may be the source of difficulty, for it is unclear what might be meant by the word if it is to be used to encompass official doctrine and popular piety. The reform of aspects of popular piety is what the official church often wanted to undertake, in acts justified as the suppression of superstition. Popular piety in Italy may have been, in some cases, influenced by knowledge of the Protestant Reformation. But I have some difficulty in understanding what reform might amount to, so to speak from the inside, at the level of popular piety and vernacular cultural practice. Noel O'Regan describes how popular musical forms, feeding into art music, could lead to a renewal of sacred music at the highest level in the second half of the 16th century. Harald Hendrix's impressive sorting out of the notion of 'simplicity', showing how Aretino's vernacular life of Christ, the *Humanità di Cristo* (1535) deployed the most complex rhetoric in order to communicate in a most 'simple' and direct way to audiences of different levels of education. But is it useful to think of either of these highly significant phenomena in terms of 'reform'? The most hopeful method of getting away from these difficulties lies, it seems to me, in the desire expressed elsewhere in the same introduction, to arrive at 'a full understanding of Cinquecento religious culture' (p. 5). Then 'reform' elements, to be found in institutional change, redefinitions of dogma and strivings for personal spiritual renewal, can sit alongside learned and vernacular beliefs and practices of new and traditional kinds as defining parts of that immensely vital culture.

My sense is that the notion of 'reform' often creates problems that mask rather than reveal the truth. In a fascinating essay on the Florentine Academy, one of the editors, Abigail Brundin, describes Vittoria Colonna as 'reform-minded'. The implication is that it is the Protestant reform of which she was minded and that the reason her poems were the subject of lectures within the Academy was 'connected to the reform-minded sympathies of Florentine academicians' (p. 61). Colonna was in search of a personal spiritual renewal, trying to find a way of being a full Christian, and she was clearly interested in ideas whose ultimate source were in the writings of Luther or Calvin. In her spiritual sonnets she shows herself to have believed in the centrality of Christ, but she also articulated beliefs in the value of the intercession of the Virgin and saints and in the efficacy of images to move Christians to devotion. A sonnet of hers on an image of the Virgin by St Luke is a remarkable and complex meditation in which she comments on the inadequacy of the image both to Luke's inner idea of Mary, and in terms of lifelikeness. The mental conception Luke had formed of her was too great for him to express coherently, while the lack of lifelikeness may (she speculates), have been the result of Luke's contempt for the ostentation of the artistry he would have had to deploy to make her seem real. However, she writes, the humble manner and gentle pose are enough to move us and turn us to God. There may be elements in Vittoria Colonna's writing which could perhaps be labelled Protestant but there was certainly a great deal which Protestants would have found anathema.

Treherne in his brilliant essay on Tasso brings out some of the layers of assumption and prejudice that cloud the issues: the belief that sincere feeling can only exist in the context of freedom of thought and that the Tridentine church was hostile to any such freedom, as well as the entrenched belief that attention to forms and rituals was attention to mere externals and therefore inimical to deep inner feeling. Tasso's late religious poetry – *Le Lagrime della Beata Vergine* of 1593 and *Il Mondo Creato* of 1594 – are used to show how remarkable and moving expressions of faith were articulated by a poet intending to express only the most orthodox set of beliefs. And comparable points are revealed through the analysis of new musical forms emerging in 16th-century Italy, developing from the very fertile resources of religious music used outside the liturgy of the mass. The essays by Iain Fenlon and Noel O'Regan on music reveal evolution and organic

change rather than reform. Antonio Corsaro's excellent essay on manuscript collections of spiritual poetry reveals an evolution in how poets thought about and presented their own work, which again does not seem to have anything to do with 'reform'.

'Reform' carries with it the sense of a conscious rejection of the status quo and at one level can be used to imply an oppositional stance to orthodoxy. In this book one sometimes detects a desire to find heterodoxy even when there is little more than a hint of anything of the sort. Because heterodoxy represents resistance to the supposedly repressive hand of the Catholic Church it is frequently regarded as virtuous, and some scholars can seemingly feel quite guiltless about giving importance to the smallest signs of it: deducing complicity, or even active participation, via reconstructions of friendship networks or tiny verbal or visual clues. As with any developed conspiracy theory, the justification for such an approach is that to expect anything more substantial is naïve because of the dangers that would have been incurred as a consequence of greater explicitness. However, as a result, the question of what can be accepted by the historian as evidence becomes a very pressing one.

In Crysa Damianaki's essay, Protestant ideas are supposed to have penetrated into the highest levels of the court of Cosimo de' Medici at Florence. She takes up a familiar argument to the effect that Jacopo da Pontormo's last major works, the now-destroyed frescoes in the choir of San Lorenzo, were heterodox: 'The greatest art work of the Protestant Reformation in the Florence of Cosimo I ...' (p.77). This is an odd claim. What we know about Pontormo is that he was a conventionally pious Catholic; the very private diary he kept when he was working on the frescoes shows that he attended mass regularly, noting holidays and respecting fasts. The paintings, on the other hand, were evidently extraordinary and highly original. But there is no evidence whatsoever that anyone at the time thought they were heterodox; they remained in place until the 18th century, when they were whitewashed. The 16th-century commentators, some of whom expressed themselves at considerable length on the subject of these paintings – Vasari (1568), Raffaello Borghini (1584) and Bocchi (1591) – were sometimes censorious. Vasari did not at all approve of what Pontormo had done and made his opinion extremely clear. In particular he thought some of the scenes incomprehensible and others as lacking the essential components for effective narrative. In general he thought they lacked the grace that had characterized Pontormo's earlier work.

Damianaki claims that the Duke himself was pro-Lutheran, and, as others have before her, sees Vasari's attack as having been mounted in this way in order to deflect attention from the heterodox content: the Duke had to be saved from embarrassment. The only specific evidence she cites for her claim about Cosimo's religious beliefs is a letter to Ambrosio di Gumpfenberg from 1546 in which the Duke wrote that although he was hostile to any alliance with Lutheran princes because of religious differences, he would treat with them when religious issues were not in question. Vasari's criticisms, on the other hand, fit precisely with a recurrent theme in his writing: the importance of intelligibility and narrative clarity, which he thought Pontormo's frescoes lacked. That same complaint had, for example, been the focus of his very hostile remarks about Giorgione's decoration of the Fondaco de' Tedeschi in Venice. What is interesting about Vasari's writing on the San Lorenzo frescoes is that he felt able to criticize his principal patron's commission in this way; it can probably be inferred that the Duke himself disliked the paintings.

When Charles de Tolnay, in an essay of 1950 (3), suggested that Pontormo's frescoes were Valdesian he was driven by prevailing historicist notions of the relationship between artistic style and philosophical outlook. But with subsequent writers it may be suspected that the desire to impute heterodoxy is a symptom of a belief in the stagnant conventionality of orthodoxy. The formal originality of Pontormo's work becomes thus, almost by definition, a rejection of such orthodoxy. This relates to an important methodological issue. It is one of the features of visual images that they are open systems of meaning. This should be a reason for proceeding with great care. If art, along with music and literature, present 'patterns of belief that often tell a different story from that of official doctrine and decrees', as stated in the introduction (p. 2), how should their supposed testimony be tested? Painting, as any of the arts, can develop according to internal pressures; changes of form may, but they do not necessarily, denote changes in wider structures of thought or belief.

This group of essays delivers on its promise of offering a 'wide range of approaches, cutting across

disciplines' (p. 4): and by that means it reveals the variety of currents present in the religious culture of Italy. There was no mental stagnation. But I would argue that the book also does something it did not intend: it reveals that 'reform' is not a useful concept to deploy as the central element in the attempt to understand that culture. Italy in the 16th century was certainly affected by the Protestant Reformation, both positively and negatively. There were certainly many Italians who wanted to reform the institutions of the church and to reformulate and better communicate what was to be believed. There were many who wanted to find a way to a personal spiritual 'reform'. But these were very different kinds of 'reform', some more metaphorical than substantial; and they could lead in very different directions. What needs stressing – and many of the contributors do so – is that there was also great potential in ideas, practices and traditions that cannot be accommodated within the term.

Over the course of the 16th century in Italy, concern with the religious and spiritual aspects of life became increasingly prominent. There was a tendency towards a separation of the religious and the secular, as is suggested by the already-mentioned contribution of Antonio Corsaro and by the very imaginative essay by Tom Nichols on the tradition of mythological painting in Venice. But were these phenomena not also the case in the Protestant parts of Europe too? The vitality of religious thought and expression in this period is a symptom of a general European preoccupation, which seems to have involved people at every level of society. There may have been a loss of the capacity of personal relationships to sustain an alternative to formal institutions, as suggested in Stephen Bowd's sensitive essay on religious friendship. But while those in positions of power may often have wanted to use those institutions to control or even entirely prevent a creative vitality of religious thought, the evidence of this book is that, in Italy, they were only very partially successful.

Notes

1. G. R. Elton, *Reformation Europe 1517–1559*, (New ed., Oxford, 1999), p. 134.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. A very interesting commentary on this was provided by William Hudon in his essay, 'Religion and Society in Early Modern Italy', *American Historical Review*, 101, 1996, 783f.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Charles de Tolnay, 'Les fresques de Pontormo dans le choeur de San Lorenzo à Florence', *Critica d'Arte*, 33, 1950, 38–52.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The editors would like to thank Professor Bury for his full and detailed response to the book, which raises a number of important and fruitful points to be brought to bear on future endeavours in this area.

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