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Heresy, Culture, and Religion in Early Modern Italy

Contexts and Contestations

Ronald K. Delph
Michelle M. Fontaine
John Jeffries Martin

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Early modern Italian history has emerged as a major field of study over the last few decades. Only thirty years ago, a famous scholar called the era that fell between the Renaissance and the Risorgimento the “forgotten centuries.” Today, by contrast, early modern Italy has become the focus of intense study in numerous fields: art history, the history of science, the history of the state, intellectual history, and, not least of all, the history of Christianity.

This volume is concerned with struggles within the dominant religious culture of Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In preparing this anthology, we became acutely aware that the traditional framework of Reformation and Counter-Reformation—or of innovation and repression—within which many scholars had previously approached this period, was no longer adequate. To be sure, few historians have ever doubted that in this period Italy was full of intellectual and cultural energy; but the Roman Catholic Church established the Inquisition, placed suspicious or possibly subversive texts on an Index of Prohibited Books, burned Giordano Bruno in Rome in 1600, and confined the eloquent court astronomer Galileo to house arrest in 1633 for having maintained too forcefully that the earth was not, as many then taught, at the center of the universe, but rather a moving planet that revolved around the sun. Whatever intellectual energies there were in Italy in this period, therefore, were harshly repressed; and France, Holland, and England emerged as the most dynamic cultures in Europe at this time.

The counterpoint between reason and reform on the one hand and repression and intolerance on the other makes for a seductively appealing story, but, as the contributions in this anthology make clear, new research has challenged this perspective. The early modern men and women who appeared to be at odds with one another were often close friends; ideas that were heterodox at one period were considered entirely orthodox at another; institutions that seemed repressive were at times centers of mediation and compromise; and, perhaps most important, the reforms in religion in this period must now be seen in a larger context of social upheaval and vast cultural changes on a variety of fronts: educational, artistic, scientific, and literary. In short, it now no longer seems possible to view the history of Italy in this period as one in which social forces or religious parties were clearly defined.

The essays in this volume represent these new perspectives. The contributors include two generations of Italian and American scholars. And, while there is no
new consensus that emerges from the works published here, we emerge from this project more convinced than ever that each particular reform movement in Italy—both from the perspective of the reformers and from the perspective of those who sought to either repress them or find other ways to bring them back into the mainstream of Italian piety—must be understood within particular social and political contexts. It is our hope, finally, that this new perspective will serve as a guide to the future studies of religion and cultural change in early modern Italy.

We put this anthology together in the age of e-mail and conference calls. In this high-speed world of instant communication, we have nonetheless had a bit of time to reflect on the fact that, despite profound differences from the religious and scholarly world that existed in Italy many centuries ago, we have much in common with the persons we study. Like sixteenth-century humanists, reformers, and church officials, we too are merely trying our best to make sense of the past and, through the study of the past, to make better sense of the world in which we live. It has been a pleasure for us to deepen our friendships while putting this book together, but each of us is also mindful that we have done this not in isolation from life but in the midst of it. One of us, after careful thought and deliberation, made a major change of emphasis in priorities, moving from the large lecture hall of the university to the smaller classroom of a private secondary school; the other two have felt the strain of trying to explain to their young children that they were busy, of all things, “working on the sixteenth century.” For all our friends and family who have been supportive of this enterprise, we are extremely grateful. And we offer a special note of appreciation to T. C. Price Zimmermann for his help with the translation of Paolo Simoncelli’s essay.

Finally, it is our special pleasure to dedicate this volume to Elisabeth Gleason. Elisabeth Gleason’s formal scholarly contributions to this field are well known, first through her nuanced studies of Italian evangelism and especially through her splendid biography of the Venetian humanist, reformer, and cardinal, Gasparo Contarini (1483–1542). Indeed, her Gasparo Contarini: Venice, Rome, and Reform (1993) has set a new standard in our field. But published work is only one index of a scholar’s influence. We all know her as a master of many languages. She was born in Belgrade, she attended school in Germany, and she had family in Austria. Her Italian is perfect, and she is a superb Latinist. But it was more than this background that made her a bridge between the American and the European worlds: it was also her lively, cosmopolitan interest in the culture on both sides of the Atlantic. She has done more than anyone in her generation to foster relationships and friendships between American and Italian scholars, many of whom have contributed to this
anthology. Perhaps her most decisive influence has been her encouragement of her students and younger colleagues. As a mentor and teacher, Elisabeth has listened to many young scholars over the years; she has helped them (and us) reformulate our dissertations, rethink our conference papers, and craft our first publications. She has always done so with courtesy, encouragement, and an uncanny ability to enable her colleagues to rethink some of their most basic assumptions. It is our hope that this volume can serve as a collective expression of our gratitude to Elisabeth for all that she has done to develop the field of the study of religion in early modern Italy.

Ronald K. Delph
Michelle M. Fontaine
John Jeffries Martin
Introduction

RENOVATIO AND REFORM IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

John Jeffries Martin

In the late 1540s the humanist Agostino Steuco—Vatican librarian, learned scholar of the Hebrew Bible, and a reformer deeply critical of the widespread corruption of the clergy—put forth an ambitious program for refurbishing and restoring the grandeur of Rome. At the core of his proposal was the renewal of the Via Lata. Over the centuries, this impressive avenue had become overgrown, its once stately monuments reduced to ruins. Steuco envisioned refurbishing this boulevard, the present-day Via del Corso, as a *restoratio imperii* that would bring glory to his pontiff and patron Pope Paul III. The renewal project Steuco imagined would, in short, reestablish an impressive avenue reaching from the Porta del Popolo to the Capitoline, the ritual center of the ancient city. Along the way there would be "three majestic water fountains whose waters would soar skyward."

No mere idealist, Steuco sought to persuade the pope that such an undertaking was possible. Furnishing enough waters for the fountains he proposed along the boulevard that was now to be called the Via Pauli would require the repair of the Aqua Virgo, one of the city’s ancient aqueducts. At the time, no one was certain of the precise location of its source. Determined to uncover the springs that fed the aqueduct, Steuco took a sabbatical from his post as Vatican librarian and set out on an expedition into the Roman countryside east of the city. His on-site archeological investigations proved as thorough as his meticulous textual scholarship. He made a positive identification of the source. With this expedition his desire for renewal had taken him literally *ad fontes*—not merely to the original texts of biblical and humanist scholarship (the primary sources that were the passion of humanists eager to strip away what they perceived as the corruptions of

1 Delph, “Renovatio, Reformatio, and Humanist Ambition in Rome,” in this volume.
the intervening centuries) but also to the natural springs in the Roman campagna that had once served as a major source of the water supply of ancient Rome.

Steuco, as Ronald Delph has shown in a number of exemplary studies (including one in this volume), was a figure of enormous complexity. A brilliant textual scholar keen on reforming a corrupt clergy, he was at the same time an ardent opponent of other brilliant textual scholars who, equally concerned by clerical corruption, proposed fundamentally different solutions to the problems confronting the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. To many of these humanists, reform required a rethinking of both the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Some of them believed that such reforms could be brought about within the framework of the Catholic Church itself. But Steuco broke company with these reformers over the matter of discipline. First he deplored the way in which they (and others like them) aired their concerns publicly. To Steuco, such criticisms—even if justified—were to remain part of a closed conversation among the clerical elites. With some justification, he was deeply fearful of the implications of spreading the criticisms of the church among the "uneducated"—as the popular turmoil in contemporary Germany seemed to caution.

But he also opposed the emphasis that Erasmus (a humanist whose methods he otherwise admired) and Luther placed on interiority, with a concomitant de-emphasis on the exterior cult of the church's rituals: appeals to saints, pilgrimages, auricular confession, and so on. For, to Steuco, as to many other Catholic reformers in this period, it was precisely the exterior cult that formed the basis of the religious discipline that he and others viewed as essential to the preservation not only of popular piety but of the social order itself.

From Steuco's perspective, there was little wrong with Rome's traditional beliefs and practices per se—what they required was renewal in light of the purest versions of these traditions. Thus his expedition into the Roman countryside might be read as a metaphor for his lifelong search for the actual sources of Rome's religious and political greatness. It might also be seen as a key to understanding a fundamental component of the culture of renovatio and reform in the sixteenth century. Steuco was every bit as intent on reform as Erasmus and Luther. Indeed, for nearly all reformers, renewal meant a return ad fontes. But in Italy, as elsewhere in sixteenth-century Europe, proponents of reform were often partisans of fundamentally different ideals or models of the church: Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, evangelical, Anabaptist, or anti-Trinitarian. Moreover, nothing was fixed about the beliefs, the positions, or the ideologies of sixteenth-century Italian reformers. This

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2 In addition to the essay cited in note 1, see Delph, "Polishing the Papal Image"; Delph, "Venetian Visitor to Curial Humanist," 126–27; and Delph, "Valla Grammaticus."

3 Seidel Menchi (Erasmo in Italia, 54) highlights Steuco's concern that theological discussion be "circoscritta ai sapienti."
was an age not only of conviction but also of contestations or arguments among reformers and of constantly shifting loyalties and beliefs—as well as of spiritual journeys that could lead an individual through an intricate array of beliefs and practices, even at times outside Christianity altogether and into Judaism or Islam. The landscape of sixteenth-century Italian reform had few fixed boundaries, even after the bishops who had gathered at the Council of Trent (1545–63) issued their formal decrees aimed at clarifying the lines between orthodoxy and heresy in the Catholic world.

The most traditional approach to the religious history of sixteenth-century Italy made little room for this complexity. To the contrary, it was—as the early histories of the Counter-Reformation in Italy portrayed it—a period of vast ecclesiastical reform, largely orchestrated from the highest circles of the Italian clerical elites, that fundamentally transformed the church and society for better or worse, depending on the scholar’s point of view. In this narrative, the history of Italian reformers, who either were Protestants themselves or seemed sympathetic to Protestant teachings, was of little significance. They were dismissed as a tiny minority, whose ideas were out of step with the powerful spiritual currents of their time. The obverse of this approach—the origins of which are to be found in the writings of such late nineteenth-century scholars as Karl Benrath and Emilio Comba—highlighted, often in a heroic narrative, the history of those few heretics or dissidents. In this view, the Reformation did penetrate Italy, and many reformers (Bernardino Ochino, Pietro Martire Vermigli, Pier Paolo Vergerio), inspired by such figures as Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, sought to bring about a renewal of Christianity along largely Protestant lines. But they necessarily failed as the triumphant church of the Counter-Reformation rooted them out through denunciations, inquisitorial trials, the burning of heretical texts, and the control of bookshops and publishers. Yet, despite the fact that these two approaches examined the religious history of the Italian peninsula from fundamentally opposing perspectives, they proved to be different sides of the same coin. Both models—whose basic frameworks still shape much thinking on the history of this period—resulted in a dichotomy that radically oversimplified the history of spiritual reform by suggesting that this topic should be approached in largely dualistic or even contrapuntal terms.

In the mid-twentieth century this dichotomy broke down. In his short but influential book, *Katholische Reformation oder Gegenreformation*, the German scholar Hubert Jedin (1900–1980), who is best known for his three-volume history of the Council of Trent, made a compelling case that many of the reform initiatives in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy in this period were not driven by what had traditionally been called a
“Counter-Reformation” but rather had developed from some of the same social and cultural tensions that had produced the Reformation. Accordingly, Jedid grouped such movements as the establishment of the Oratory of Divine Love and the Theatines as well as the Fifth Lateran Council under the rubric “Catholic Reform.” In this same period, though slightly earlier, a similar shift took place in the study of the Italian “Reformation.” In his magisterial study Eretici italiani del Cinquecento, the Italian historian Delio Cantimori (1904–66) made it clear that many of the heretical ideas that had previously been seen as offshoots of German or Swiss Protestantism were neither Lutheran nor Zwinglian nor Calvinist in any formal sense. To the contrary, the proponents of these ideas were, as Cantimori put it in a famous phrase, “rebels against any form of ecclesiastical organization.”

In addition, Cantimori stressed the originality of their thought, which he linked explicitly to Italian traditions and ideas of the Renaissance. Though looking at fundamentally different facets of the religious life in sixteenth-century Italy, Jedid and Cantimori presented compelling and complementary new models that enabled a far more nuanced picture of the Italian religious landscape to emerge. Jedid made it plain that early modern Catholicism could not be reduced to the Counter-Reformation, that the impulses for spiritual and ecclesiastical reform (within the Catholic world) were much broader. In a similar fashion, Cantimori’s arguments made it impossible to reduce the Italian reform movement to Protestantism, and he too made it clear that the range of religious ideals among the heretics was much wider than earlier scholars had recognized. Together, therefore, these works had the effect of making it possible for students of sixteenth-century Italy to recognize that the spectrum of religious reform was both broad and rich in color. To be sure, it was still possible to identify individuals in Italy who were proponents of Lutheran or Calvinist ideas as well as a number of prelates who adopted theological ideas and institutional strategies that are best understood primarily, if not exclusively, as reactions to Protestantism and for whom, therefore, the term “Counter-Reformation” is not inappropriate. But these two groups represent only certain tendencies within a much broader array of beliefs and efforts for reform. Moreover, many individuals in Italy did not adhere exclusively to one position. Many reformers, for example, shifted their positions over time, in response to both social and personal (or psychological) factors. Finally—and this is a complication that is the root of so many of the debates within the study of the reform movements in Italy in this period—proponents of the Catholic Reformation and prominent figures active in movements in Italy that were either explicitly heretical

4Cantimori, Eretici italiani del Cinquecento, viii.
5For a fascinating discussion of Jedid’s and Cantimori’s relationship, see O’Malley, Trent and All That, 78–82.
or that eventually came to be defined as heretical often overlapped and influenced one another. In short, the religious map of Italy in this period is not only complex; it is full of contradictions, inconsistencies, and contestations.

To a large degree, scholars of the Italian reform movements have been working within this intricate and often confusing framework ever since. At first, especially in the ecumenical climate of Vatican II (1962–65), there was a tendency to emphasize the central role of what came to be called evangelism—a loosely defined set of ideas that were seen as conciliatory, largely inspired by the writings of Saint Paul, sympathetic to many of Luther’s teachings and yet committed to trying to bring about a reform within the Roman Catholic Church. Early studies emphasized the significance of a number of the major reformers in this group: Gasparo Contarini, Gianmatteo Giberti, Marcantonio Flaminio, Reginald Pole, and Vittoria Colonna. In much of the historiography, these figures have come to be known as the spirituali, in contrast to those more hard-line reformers such as Giampietro Caraffa, Michele Ghislieri, and Scipione Rebiba who sought to clamp down on any manifestation of sympathy with the Protestant Reformation, who supported a vast, centralizing reorganization of the Roman Inquisition and the careful control of the circulation of printed matter up and down the peninsula—supporters, that is, of a Counter-Reformation whom scholars have often grouped together under the label zelanti or intransigenti. It was originally believed, moreover, that the climate after the early 1540s, following the death of Contarini and the flight of Ochino (discussed below in the essay by Paul Murphy) as well as the founding of the Jesuits, the refurbishing of the Roman Inquisition, and the convocation of the Council of Trent, marked a major turning point in the religious history of the peninsula as hopes for significant reform faded, and the intransigent party gained control of the church. This certainly was the chronology that Cantimori himself favored, judging from his book Prospettive di riforma eretica italiana del Cinquecento (1960), his concise overview of the period. It is a chronology, moreover, that continues to inform much of the Italian scholarship on this topic.

But more recent work, especially by scholars in North America, has challenged many aspects of this paradigm. As Anne Jacobson Schutte has pointed out in an influential essay, the newer scholarship devoted to the history of the religious life of the peninsula has demonstrated that not all hope for reform was lost in the 1540s. To the contrary, scholars have found compelling evidence for the existence—despite the increasingly repressive measures of the church—of well-organized and well-connected heretical groups active in Italy down to the 1580s.  

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