

Paolo Sarpi

Between Renaissance and Enlightenment

DAVID WOOTTON

*Assistant professor in history
Dalhousie University, Canada*

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Introduction

The contemplative atheist is rare: a Diagoras, a Dion, a Lucian perhaps, and some others; and yet they seem to be more than they are; for that all that impugn a received religion or superstition are by the orthodox part branded with the name of atheists. But the great atheists indeed are hypocrites; which are ever handling holy things, but without feeling; so as they must needs be cauterized in the end. (F. Bacon, 'Of Atheism', *Essays* (definitive edition, London, 1625))

The most important of *congenital* obligations is that which concerns the duty of all men toward God, the final arbiter of this universe; by it we are obligated to venerate Him and to acknowledge His dominion and laws. Whoever wholly denies this obligation brings upon his own head the stigma of atheism. And this takes place whenever anyone denies either that God himself exists, or else that He takes an interest in human affairs. For these two statements as regards moral effect are equal, and by each of them all religion is destroyed and reduced to a bit of mummery, wherewith to curb the unlicensed mob. (S. Pufendorf, *de Iure Naturae et Gentium Libri Octo* (Amsterdam, 1688), bk III, ch. 4, p. 259)

...atheists, who deny either the existence of God or his divine providence, and to whom those persons who deny the immortality of the soul are closely related. For the only justice these last know is that which is based on advantage, measured by their own judgement. With them you may also class those whose manner of life is an open profession of villainy, such as pirates, thieves, murderers, pimps, courtesans, and others of their kind who take a pleasure in perjury. (*ibid.*, ch. 6, p. 281)

Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623) is best known for his *History of the Council of Trent* (1619), which has always been recognised as one of the greatest historical works of its day. Indeed it is more than that, for Sarpi's unremitting consistency in portraying the history of the Catholic Church in terms of purely worldly, secular concerns not only made him a continuing source of inspiration for those who were opposed to clerical interference in secular affairs, to religious persecution, and to doctrinal intolerance, but it also opened the way to a purely secular vision of history and of society, so that it has entitled him to be considered one of the most important precursors of Gibbon and of the Enlightenment.¹ As an historian alone Sarpi would be worthy of fame, but the writing of history was only one small part of the activities. Historians of science remember him for his association with Acquapendente and the Paduan school of anatomy: his

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biographer and amanuensis Fulgenzio Micanzio claims for him, amongst other things, the original discovery of the valves in the veins, although, knowing nothing of the circulation of the blood, Sarpi concluded that they were there to stop the blood from pooling in the feet and legs.² Nor were his interests confined to anatomy. Gilbert, the discoverer of magnetism, regarded Sarpi as a great mathematician, while he was a friend of Galileo's, and one of the first to look through his telescope.³ But science played a less important part in Sarpi's life as he grew older.⁴ He found his real vocation in 1606, when he became a legal adviser to the Venetian Republic. Thanks to this position he was able to work in closest collaboration with Venice's leading politicians, seeking to fortify the Republic in her struggle against the Counter-Reformation papacy and the Habsburgs, and winning European fame (and a place in histories of political thought alongside William Barclay and James I) for his public defence of the rights of secular sovereigns.⁵

As historian, scientist and political philosopher, Sarpi's place in history is assured. But this book is as much about Sarpi's private thoughts, the views recorded in his *Pensieri*, as it is about his public activities, and in order to understand these *Pensieri* it looks at Sarpi's contemporaries as much as at Sarpi himself.⁶ My purpose in concentrating on Sarpi's private thoughts is not just to throw new light on his public actions, for Sarpi's *Pensieri* throw new light on the intellectual and political life of his age, as well as on his own personal biography. They do this simply because they were revolutionary, and they pose the exciting question of how it became possible to think such things. For Sarpi, I believe, was hostile not merely to the Counter-Reformation papacy, but to Christianity itself. More than this, it seems likely that he was unique in his day in holding that the existing social order could be sustained without the support of religious belief. Sarpi's political objective – an unrealisable and unavowable one – was the foundation of a secular society. If he held such opinions then commonly held views regarding the intellectual life of his day need to be revised, as do the assumptions most of us hold regarding the reasons for the decline of religious faith over the last few centuries.

Sarpi's true beliefs and real historical importance become apparent, I believe, through the study of his *Pensieri*, his private notebooks, and particularly the *Pensieri* which deal with religion. When I first read these notes I found them so strange, so direct an attack on beliefs which I had felt sure all intellectuals of Sarpi's day regarded as unquestionable, that my first reaction was to conclude that they were an eighteenth-century forgery. Once I had realised that the authenticity of the *Pensieri* was indubitable, I set myself the task of trying to make sense of them, of trying to understand under what circumstances these ideas would have carried conviction.⁷ In carrying out this undertaking I have concentrated on three questions: what were the intellectual traditions which crucially influenced Sarpi in reaching the conclusions spelled out in the *Pensieri*

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on religion? What were the political and social circumstances in which these conclusions seemed realistic? And what significance do Sarpi's views as expressed in the *Pensieri* have for our understanding of his activities in later years, especially of his unremitting struggle against Spain and the papacy, and of his intentions in writing his magnum opus, the *History of the Council of Trent*?

In answering these questions I have sought to provide an interpretation of Sarpi's beliefs and his actions. But my account of Sarpi is also intended to serve as a case study which will serve to illustrate a range of problems which lie at the heart of any account of the place of religion in early modern intellectual life.

In the first place I hope that my analysis of Sarpi's *Pensieri* will suggest that people in the sixteenth century found it easier not to believe in God than has been claimed, for example, by Lucien Febvre, whose *La religion de Rabelais: le problème de l'incroyance au seizième siècle* (1942) argued that the sixteenth century was 'un siècle qui veut croire', a century in which the very concepts and assumptions necessary for a systematic unbelief were lacking. We will see Sarpi in the *Pensieri* finding and forging all the arguments an atheist might need, and I hope my study of Sarpi may encourage a new approach to the question of the nature and limits of intellectual unbelief in the period between the Reformation and the Enlightenment to complement the studies of popular unbelief undertaken by Carlo Ginzburg and Christopher Hill.⁸

In studying Sarpi's *Pensieri* I have concentrated upon one theme in particular, that of the possibility of a society of atheists. This is in the first place because this was one of the most original of Sarpi's arguments: a similar claim was not to be made in print until Pierre Bayle's *Pensées diverses sur la comète* of 1682. But it is also because I believe that the conviction that belief in God alone made social life possible represented the most powerful obstacle to the progress of unbelief in the early modern period.⁹ Historians like Febvre have tended to see progress in man's understanding of nature as the essential precondition for the emergence of a rational unbelief. But Aristotelianism had long been recognised as providing an account of nature which left no scope for revelation, miracles or a life after death. What was lacking in the early modern period was not a secular theory of nature but a secular theory of society such as the Enlightenment was to find in Bayle, Mandeville and Hume.

Sarpi's belief that religion was not the most important social bond meant that he, unlike Naudé and the *libertins érudits* studied by René Pintard, could allow his unbelief to become a guide to practice. Like other unbelievers of his day Sarpi had to confine knowledge of his unbelief to a small circle of personal intimates, but unlike most of them Sarpi sought to employ his public avowal of faith not merely as a passive defence against prosecution but also as a shield behind which he could advance the cause of irreligion. Sarpi, on my account, was a hypocrite. What was remarkable about him, however, was not his

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hypocrisy – for this was an age which contemporaries believed to be riddled with deceit – but the creative use to which he put it.

Sarpi represents a fascinating problem in the history of ideas. To determine what his beliefs were and to establish the relationship between them and his actions has been the first objective of this study. But Sarpi is also, I believe, a key figure in three histories which have yet to be written, three histories which are intimately interconnected: the history of unbelief, the history of the secularisation of social and political theory, and the history of intellectual deception. In each of these histories he deserves to take his place alongside Hobbes and Bayle. I have tried to suggest in this study that the idea that atheists are not necessarily anti-social provides the crucial link between Sarpi's private beliefs and his public actions. I hope later in a more general study to argue that this same idea lies at the heart of the seventeenth-century transition from a religious to a secular viewpoint. But a consideration of such general issues is beyond the scope of the present study. My purpose here is to analyse Sarpi's relationship to the world of which he was aware: the world of Venice, of scholastic philosophy, of Catholicism and Calvinism. My hope is to reconstruct the drama within which he saw himself as acting a part during his years of public activity, and to discover the intellectual convictions which led him on to the political stage. Only when a place has been found for Sarpi amongst the arguments and the events of his own day can the historian hope to establish his proper place in the history of ideas.

Before I proceed, however, I would like to pause and establish a clear terminology with which to discuss Sarpi's beliefs. Care is necessary here, both because words in the early modern period did not always mean what they mean now, but also because in order to bring out the common assumptions of men in the past it is sometimes necessary to adopt a terminology which is more exact than the one they themselves employed, and this involves giving ordinary words a precise and technical meaning. My purpose is not to devise a novel vocabulary, but to find a way of giving clear expression to the views of Sarpi and his contemporaries. Throughout this book I use the word *atheist* to mean someone who believes not only that there is no God, but also that belief in God is irrational. An *unbeliever* is someone who finds himself unable to believe in God, although he may well feel that reason is on the side of belief. A *fideist* is someone who holds that it is impossible to prove that his own theological beliefs are the true ones, but who has nevertheless decided to set reason aside and to trust himself to faith.

These distinctions, however, are insufficient for our purposes. One can believe in a divine creator but not believe in any divine revelation. We may call this *deism*. *Deists* are *irreligious* in that they do not believe that any particular religion has been divinely ordained. Deists however fall into two categories: some believe that God is just God, and that he will therefore punish the bad

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and reward the good, either in this life or the next. Such deists believe in a divine *providence*. By this I mean not just that they believe that the universe is divinely ordered, but that they hold that an essential part of this order is God's law for the punishment of evil and the reward of good: in this book I nearly always use *providence* in this limited and technical sense. Other deists do not believe in divine punishment, believing either that God is merciful, or that there is no life after this in which the injustices of this life will be righted. In the sixteenth century such people were called 'atheists', and when I employ the term in inverted commas I mean to refer to people who would have been called 'atheists' by their contemporaries because they denied the existence of a divine providence, whether or not they believed in God. Such a usage may seem confusing, but it is almost impossible to avoid it when giving expression to the views of contemporaries. Recognising this problem J. C. A. Gaskin has invented the term *moral atheist* for one 'who denies the existence of any God having moral attributes', and who consequently, whether he believes in the existence of a God or not, is in the same position as an atheist as far as arguments about morality are concerned. This coinage seems to me a useful one, and I will use the term *moral atheist* to refer to people contemporaries would have bluntly termed 'atheists'. *Moral atheists* are thus, for our purposes, people who do not believe in a providential God; they may act morally, or they may not.¹⁰

Three other terms need to be defined at the outset. In my view Sarpi was a *secular* social theorist who believed in the possibility of a *secular society*. That is to say that his theories about society do not presume society or social institutions to be divinely instituted, and that he believes that society could survive even if people did not believe that anti-social behaviour would meet with divine punishment, even if people were 'atheists' who denied the existence of a providential God. To have a theory of a secular society it is necessary to believe that moral atheists are not inherently more anti-social than other people. For convenience sake I refer to this belief as a belief in the *sociability* of 'atheists', by which I do not mean a belief in their good-fellowship and warm-heartedness, but in their ability to live together in society, to obey their sovereign and the law.

Sarpi was also, I believe, a proponent of *absolutism*. By this I do not mean that he believed in the unchecked rule of one person. Theorists of absolutism like Bodin (at least on occasion) and Filmer argued that the only legitimate form of government was monarchy, on the grounds that no corporate body could properly be said to have a will of its own. But Hobbes, although he preferred monarchy, was quite willing to approve government by an assembly as long as that assembly exercised absolute powers. Sarpi was an absolutist in this broader sense. He believed that the ruler, be he a single individual or a corporate entity, must not be overruled by any other authority in this world.

Absolutism as a political philosophy, however, is often associated with

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absolutism as a social order: what Marxists call feudal-absolutism. In my view it is important to recognise, if one is to understand how Sarpi came to be deeply influenced by French political philosophy, that the Venetian nobility and the French *noblesse de robe* had much in common. In the course of the sixteenth century many Venetian nobles had given up trade to become landowners.¹¹ But many of the poorer ones had become increasingly dependent on the income they obtained from offices in the state administration.¹² Thus in Venice, as in France, a large section of the nobility made its living from office-holding, that is to say from the proceeds of taxation. In Venice the members of the senate and in France the members of the Parlement had a common interest in extending the power of the state if that would serve to improve their income from office-holding. Behind the rhetoric of absolutism there lay therefore the social reality of *absolutist society*. This may be defined as a social order where a substantial part of the income of the ruling class comes from state expenditure, the rest coming largely from rent extracted from the peasantry. Income from state expenditure may, as in the Prussia of the Great Elector, supplement income from rent, or it may, as in the France of Richelieu, support a distinct fraction of the ruling class, a fraction whose interests do not always coincide with those of the landed nobility.¹³

From one point of view Venice in the early seventeenth century can be portrayed as the last surviving independent republic of Renaissance Italy, surrounded by the princely courts of the new absolutist states – the ecclesiastical lands, ruled by the pope; the duchy of Milan, ruled by a governor-general appointed by the king of Spain; Tuscany, ruled by the Medici.¹⁴ But from another point of view one may note that the social elite was a landed aristocracy in Venice as elsewhere, and that patronage was as important to the Venetian nobility as to the nobilities of other states, even if it was dispensed through the votes of the senate, rather than by a prince and his favourite.¹⁵ In the sixteenth century Gasparo Contarini and Paolo Paruta had been concerned to stress the peculiarity of Venetian institutions in order to praise Venice's republican traditions.¹⁶ In the seventeenth century Sarpi was concerned to emphasise that Venice was a state like other states. Meanwhile his more conservative contemporaries complained that young nobles were abandoning the distinctive somber dress of their forefathers and were beginning to dress in courtier's clothes, to ride horses and to wear swords, in short to behave like nobles everywhere.¹⁷ Thus, if we are to understand Sarpi's relationship to his political milieu it will be necessary to reconsider the significance of Venetian republicanism. I would suggest that the Venetian nobility were, in our period, an aristocracy who happened to exercise power through republican institutions. They were no more attached to liberty or social harmony than the other aristocracies of western Europe.

Finally, a word about theories, beliefs and motivations. Sarpi's *Pensieri*

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provide a record of his thoughts. He may not have believed all the thoughts he recorded. He may have believed them and at the same time believed other things quite incompatible with them: Evans-Pritchard in his famous study of the Azande successfully demonstrated that it is possible to believe simultaneously many quite incompatible doctrines, and we are all capable of more mundane forms of inconsistency.¹⁸ Darwin, for example, continued to think in terms of a divine architect long after he had demonstrated the inadequacy of arguments from design.¹⁹ Finally, Sarpi may have accepted the arguments of the *Pensieri* and not believed other things he wrote elsewhere. In order to facilitate choosing between these three possibilities I have as far as possible kept distinct the different types of statement Sarpi made in different contexts: when writing for himself, on behalf of the Venetian government, to Protestant friends, as an historian addressing an anonymous audience. I hope to show that Sarpi's actions can be shown to be explicable in terms of the views he expressed when writing for himself, and that there is no other explanation which makes coherent sense of Sarpi's behaviour. The possibility of incoherence, however, can never be finally eliminated.

If this was primarily a biography of Sarpi, my account of Sarpi's beliefs and motives would be the core of the book. But it is not. The core of this book is Sarpi's thoughts. What is astonishing is that he was able to think what he did. Perhaps he did not always believe what he wrote in the *Pensieri*, or always act in the light of it. If so, then he may not have been as great a man as I have taken him to be, but the importance of the *Pensieri* is scarcely diminished. It was long thought that Copernicus never believed that the earth went round the sun; even had this been the case he would still have made the belief a reasonable one.²⁰ So, an account of Sarpi's beliefs and motivations must be speculative. What need not be speculative is an account of his words, his arguments, his thoughts. This book is thus in the first place an interpretation of a set of texts, and only in the second place a study of Paolo Sarpi.