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Edited by Gigliola Fragnito

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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The aim of this book is to contribute to knowledge of ecclesiastical censorship between the mid-sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries in the light of new critically edited sources and of the ‘Roman’ documentation that has become recently available. Since the pioneering works of Antonio Rotondò, Pasquale Lopez, Paul F. Grendler and John Tedeschi, studies on censorship have languished. Of course, there has been no lack of important and thorough analysis of the controls imposed on the circulation of books, yet the primacy assumed in the past thirty years by the events surrounding the penetration into Italy of heretical doctrines has induced scholars to concentrate on the spread and suppression of theological works deemed heretical. Less attention, however, has been paid to other ‘disciplinary’ sectors, ones on which censorship seems to have had equally radical effects, although with outcomes still largely to be explored. Also neglected has been the fundamental problem of the manner and times of the creation of a central control system endowed with a peripheral organization capable of translating the orders issued by the Roman offices into efficacious censorial practice.

There is no doubt that practical difficulties have hampered investigation of these matters, most notably the lack of critical editions of the *Index librorum prohibitorum* promulgated by Rome during the cinquecento (1559, 1564, 1596) and of the ‘local’ indexes. This absence made it difficult for scholars to find their way through the tangle of prohibitions and suspensions which – often with ambiguities, inaccuracies and errors – afflicted authors, individual works, or even entire categories of texts. But it also obstructed reconstruction of the tortuous passage of the universal indexes before their promulgation and controversial implementation, amid frequent changes of mind as well as fierce conflict among the Roman censorial organs. Since 1996, the year that saw completion of J. M. De Bujanda’s monumental and exemplary edition

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of the *Index des livres interdits* published in the sixteenth century, this obstacle has been removed, and scholars are now equipped with an indispensable tool with which to conduct critical examination of censorship in its various aspects.

Two years later, on 23 January 1998, a further impediment was lifted with the official opening of the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which contains the archives of both the Congregations of the Inquisition and the Index, although access had already been granted to a growing number of scholars prior to that date. This was an event of paramount importance for the history of censorship. For two reasons. First, unlike the archive of the Inquisition, which has suffered repeated and conspicuous losses, that of the Index does not seem to have been subject to significant depredations. Secondly, the documentation now available makes up for the shortcomings of the inquisitorial records kept in Italian and foreign libraries and archives, records which yield only meagre and fragmentary information on the control of printed matter. Now seemingly invested at the central level is the relationship that used to hold at the local level, where scant documentation on censorship was offset by the abundance of materials on the prosecutions mounted by the peripheral courts, so that studies on the Inquisition could fruitfully continue despite the inaccessibility of the Roman archive.

This happy conjuncture has prompted the strong revival and fundamental renewal of studies on ecclesiastical censorship that this collection of essays seeks to convey, albeit with the inevitable limitations. The book, in fact, reflects a phase of research that can still be considered 'exploratory', given the extraordinary richness of the sources and their only recent accessibility. More than purveying definitive results – assuming that there can ever be definitive results in historical research – the essays that follow seek principally to explore hitherto neglected areas of inquiry, raising problems and issues which emerge from investigation which, though detailed, is also necessarily circumscribed both chronologically and thematically.

The decision of this book to concentrate on the second half of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth – or the period that saw the most intense production of Roman universal indexes – was prompted by two main considerations. Within a span of fifty-odd years, from promulgation of Paul IV's index (1559) to the full implementation in the first decade of the Sixteenth of Clement VIII's index (1596), one witnesses a long process of the inception and consolidation of the central and peripheral bodies deputed to control the circulation of books, while, albeit amid controversy, the range of application of censorial

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rules expanded and grew more exact. Testifying to this is the changing nature of the authorities which issued the first three universal indexes: the first of them drafted by the Roman Inquisition, the second prepared by a committee of bishops appointed by the Council of Trent, and the third drawn up by the Congregation of the Index instituted in 1572. This plurality of censorial organs – flanked by the Master of the Sacred Palace, who was charged with controlling printed matter in Rome and its district but was also highly active outside his jurisdiction, especially in the 1570s – gave rise to disputes that sometimes degenerated into outright conflicts which involved the pontiffs themselves. The cause of the tensions so distinctive of these first fifty years of Roman censorship was the growing power of the Congregation of the Inquisition, which certain pontiffs endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to curb. While on the one hand the Congregation of the Inquisition constantly insisted that the prohibitions contained in the first index that it had drawn up (1559) should be observed and included in subsequent catalogues, on the other it sought to ensure that censorial directives reflected the principles in matters of faith and morality defined in its decrees and sentences. Authorized – like the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions – by Rule X of the Tridentine index¹ to pronounce prohibitions and condemnations on books and authors, the Roman Inquisition exploited the clause to cause difficulties not only for the Congregation of the Index but also for the pontiffs themselves. The reasons for friction were various: there was dissent on whether authors, individual works or categories of texts should be prohibited or suspended *donec corrigantur*, on who should issue reading permits; on the ‘rules’ that should have regulated censorial activity; and on the competences of the bishops and inquisitors in the outlying provinces. The friction created a stalemate which was responsible for the failure to promulgate three versions of the third Roman index, two of which had already been printed. The tensions came to a head in 1596, when the Inquisition achieved a crushing victory by obtaining suspension of the already promulgated Clementine index and imposing its intransigent line not only on the Congregation of the Index but on Pope Aldobrandini (Clement VIII) himself, whom it compelled to make substantial changes to the already promulgated catalogue.

The conflict was manifest in the alternating fortunes in the various indexes (promulgated and otherwise) of certain works and certain authors: after first being suspended and then permitted under licence, and then banned outright, only at the end of the century were they definitively allocated to the category of books *omnino prohibiti* (absolutely

¹ *ILI*, VIII, p. 821.

prohibited). Emblematic in this regard are the vicissitudes of the Talmud, carefully reconstructed by Fausto Parente in his essay. Banned for a first time by the inquisitorial index of 1559, and subject in subsequent catalogues to further provisions, some of them more moderate, the Talmud reappeared in the Clementine index accompanied by the original prohibition vigorously and unyieldingly reaffirmed by the Congregation of the Holy Office, which did not hesitate to oppose the suspension *donec corrigatur* decreed by the Tridentine fathers and subsequently by Sixtus V and Clement VIII. Episodes such as this, together with those of the vernacular translations of Holy Scripture mentioned by various essays in this book, show that the censorial apparatus was not the well-oiled machinery that has often been depicted; rather, it frequently jammed, and changes of mind, reversals and dithering gave it a markedly erratic course. The plurality and conflicts of the bodies responsible for censorship, turnover in the Church executive and on the papal throne, and political pressures: these and other factors described by the essays in this book combined to determine the decisions taken by the coercive apparatus and to influence the directives issued by Rome – the contradictions, confusion and vagueness of which caused more damage than the Roman offices envisaged. An exemplary case is the pointless destruction caused by the ban on vernacular translations of the Bible, the harshness of which provoked such resistance that it had perforce to be moderated. But this belated attenuation was communicated to the periphery only after implementation of the Clementine index, and therefore when a literary heritage of incalculable value had already been consigned to the flames.

The severe tensions among the central agencies of censorship also had operational repercussions. The weakness of the peripheral inquisitorial apparatus – which was only consolidated from the 1580s onwards and only in central–northern Italy – thwarted the Holy Office's endeavour to monopolize control of the printing press, and it hampered uniform and ubiquitous vigilance. At the end of the century, shortcomings in the application of the first two indexes induced the Congregation of the Index to set up local 'congregations of the index' – presided over by the bishops but supervised by the central offices – in individual dioceses. Prompted not only by the effective inadequacy of the inquisitorial structures, but also by the political intent to increase its power in the periphery, the Congregation's project to assign a pre-eminent role to the bishops and to steer them in application of the third index was indubitably the greatest effort made to reorganize and rationalize the censorship system. However, not only did it encounter the obstructionism of the central and peripheral organs of the Holy Office, but it

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was undermined by the frequent absenteeism of the bishops, the inertia of the diocesan ordinaries in southern Italy and the difficulty of recruiting competent and diligent consultors to flank the ordinaries in their work of prevention and expurgation. The project's substantial failure marked the end of any aspiration by the Congregation of the Index to operate in the periphery through its local branches, and it restored to the Inquisition the policing role that it had claimed since its inception.

Yet this failure did not have severe repercussions on the suppression of prohibited books. In fact, although not uniformly distributed across the peninsula like the diocesan curiae, the Holy Office's tribunals had been strategically established not only in areas at most risk of Protestant infiltration, such as the alpine regions, but also in towns where the presence of universities, academies, printers and bookshops fostered intellectual activity and created the greatest danger of culturally and religiously suspect ferment. And in these places, as evinced by the application of the Clementine index, the inquisitors efficiently performed their task of seizing prohibited and suspended books. That censorship was elsewhere in the hands of bishops who proved anything but diligent was not a matter of great concern to the Roman offices. The parts of the country that did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Roman Inquisition were largely those which were most culturally backward and where the greatest threat to orthodoxy was raised by 'superstitions'; and towards these superstitions the Church and its clergy (who were themselves profoundly imbued with them) showed the broadest tolerance.

By contrast, the failed or stunted institution of the local 'congregations of the index' had extremely serious consequences for expurgatory policy. These organs, in fact, were given the highly ambitious task of revising and correcting a huge number of texts so that they complied with ever more rigid criteria of orthodoxy. This project had already been envisaged by the index of 1564, and it was prompted by the incontrovertible need of university lecturers and members of the professions to consult the works of scholars and experts who had gone over to the Reformation. Expurgation, in fact, would have made it possible to reissue not only works intended for pure enjoyment, such as the literary texts examined by Ugo Rozzo, but also those indispensable for the practice of the professions, such as the legal texts analysed by Rodolfo Savelli – however much the correctors may have tampered with them. Yet the obstacles against the decentralization of expurgatory work proved insurmountable. The Roman expurgatory index was announced as early as 1564, but it only finally made its appearance in 1607. And

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despite years of exhausting labour on hundreds of suspended texts, it contained the corrections of only fifty-three works. The others were destined to disappear permanently from the market and from numerous public and private libraries. Once again, the wide gap between the totality of ambitions and inadequate means of achieving them caused damage difficult to quantify but undoubtedly more severe than was desired.

However, it would be reductive to blame the failures of Roman censorial policy only on the disorganization of the system or on conflicts among the central organs of censorship and between the inquisitors and the bishops (the latter, indeed, were not even authorized to read banned books²). The decision to extend the range of the present book from the thoroughly explored terrain of heretical works to analysis of ecclesiastical censorship from new standpoints has revealed hitherto unsuspected areas of repressive action, while also highlighting the uncertainties and ambiguities of censorial policy. Whereas condemning a work that dealt *ex professo* with theology for its heretical content posed no problems, given the progressive extension of the notion of heresy to cover every branch of knowledge, sifting through works belonging to diverse disciplines and deciding which of them should be banned and which suspended, and what material in the latter should be cancelled and what instead emended, was a much more complex undertaking. A signal example is provided by the work of the Jesuit Antonio Possevino. After Possevino had removed from Conrad Gesner's *Bibliotheca universalis* all the writings and authors that he believed were at variance with Catholic doctrine and morality, and after he had transformed this, the most complete and objective source of bibliographical information then available into a work of anti-heretical propaganda and a defence of Catholics against dangerous reading matter, Possevino found his own *Bibliotheca selecta* and *Apparatus sacer* coming under the censure of his superiors. Luigi Balsamo illustrates in his essay how this censure, its severity notwithstanding, failed to prevent Possevino from recommending works that would later be condemned, or from suggesting the use of expurgatory indexes like the Spanish or the Louvain ones, or

² First introduced in the turbulent period of the inquisitorial trials of bishops and cardinals during the pontificate of Julius III, the prohibition was reiterated in the years of application of the Clementine index. Cf. *Directorium Inquisitorum F. Nicolai Eymerici*, Romae, Aedibus Populi Romani, Apud Georgium Ferrarium, 1587, p. 91. The request by Filippo Archinto, bishop of Como, for authorisation to keep and read 'prohibited books by heretics and to grant it to others' was rejected by the Congregation of the Holy Office on 21 March 1596 (ACDF, SO, *Decreta* 1596, f. 370v). See also BAV, *Borg. lat.* 538, pp. 261–5.

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even that compiled by the Capuchin Gregorio da Napoli: all of these were regarded with great suspicion by the Congregation of the Index. Keeping abreast with the Roman proscriptions was no easy matter, as testified, for example, by Bartolomeo Dionigi from Fano, who – as Edoardo Barbieri explains in his essay – wrote the *Compendio storico del Vecchio e del Nuovo Testamento* with the explicit intent of circumventing the ban on reading the complete text of the Bible in the vernacular. After appearing in numerous editions, ten years later the *Compendio* was one of the works most frequently seized in the application of the Clementine index.

However, it was not only the progressive hardening of Rome's stance that complicated the work of the censors, both those appointed to apply the rules and those like Possevino and his endeavour, by diluting or manipulating Gesner's work, to offer a veritable 'encyclopaedia of the Counter-Reformation' specular to the indexes of banned books. Apparently clear prohibitions, in fact, often concealed contradictory positions at the summit of the Church. The queries sent in to the central offices from the periphery illustrate the enormous difficulties provoked by proscriptions whose formulation reflected intricate compromises or profound uncertainties. The vagueness or evasiveness of the replies were due, not to the inefficiency or negligence of the functionaries but to the disquiet caused by rules whose rigid application not only encountered strong and justified resistance among those responsible for enforcing them, and among those subject to them, but also often proved to be impracticable. These difficulties are perhaps best illustrated by the inconsistencies among the bans imposed on astrological works, which Ugo Baldini analyses. The prohibitions set out in Sixtus V's bull *Coeli et terra creator* (1586) – which, contrary to traditional practice and the rules of 1564 (reiterated in 1596) that prohibited only predictions that 'necessitated' the will, also condemned those that 'inclined' it – are indicative of indecision and ambiguity in legislation on a matter that was in many respects insidious. While in theoretical terms the contradictory nature of the prohibitions reflected the absence until the end of the seventeenth century of an epistemological distinction between astrology and astronomy, and of a clear differentiation between judicial astrology and natural astrology, in operational terms it reveals perplexity over the eradication of divinatory practices and of an abundant body of astrological literature (ranging from theoretical treatises to almanacs, to prognostications on specific events) largely accepted by the elites, and also indeed by the upper echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy itself. In these circumstances, although the Sistine bull remained formally in force, prohibitions were only able to counteract public manifestations of

the phenomenon, not the private ones towards which the Church continued to show considerable tolerance.

Similar ambiguities transpire from the suspension by the 1596 index of books on duelling, which were prohibited until their expurgation of any content not pertinent to the settling of disputes and the re-establishment of peace. Providing indispensable support for the nobiliary and chivalric ideology dominant in sixteenth-century Italy, these books enjoyed enormous publishing success, despite the Tridentine condemnation of duelling (1563), and – as Claudio Donati shows – they constituted one of the most widely and frequently seized categories of books. But their correction, assigned first to reluctant members of the nobility and then to theologians and jurists at the University of Bologna, proved so difficult that the revisors recommended their total suppression. The failure to retrieve them, as envisaged by the rules, through the printing of booklets listing the corrections to be made to old editions, or of new revised and corrected editions, did not lead to the total disappearance of ‘chivalrous science’, because this was an essential and ineradicable part of nobiliary ideology. Disseminated through old editions which escaped seizure (which Possevino did not hesitate to recommend in the 1607 edition of his *Bibliotheca selecta*) or dissimulated in new works devoted to the peaceful resolution of feuds and conflicts on points of honour, chivalrous science continued to circulate, tacitly tolerated by a significant part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of noble extraction and culture.

The complex picture that emerges from reconstruction of the vicissitudes of certain categories of books, and from analysis of the operations of the agencies charged with implementing the Roman directives, demonstrates that accurate assessment of the extent and incisiveness of Rome’s control over the written word requires us to go beyond the lists of authors and works set out in the indexes, and beyond the deceptive clarity of prohibitions and suspensions. We must delve instead into the workings of the Roman offices, where we find further evidence of the gap between practice and principle. Structural shortcomings and ideological uncertainties, in fact, often produced outcomes greatly at variance with the intention of the indexes, and they show that analysis of the effects of censorship on Italian culture must be set on a new footing. Inquiries in certain ‘disciplinary’ sectors hitherto little studied – inquiries that in the future should extend to other categories such as humanistic texts, books on medicine, philosophy, history, and similar – yield a more articulated vision of the consequences of a project which, by seeking to bring every branch of knowledge under Rome’s sway, proved to be largely impracticable. Its

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ambitious goals were matched neither by sufficient manpower nor by a clear perception of the practical implications of such a vast undertaking. Yet it would be a mistake to believe that the failures due to the intrinsic weakness of the censorial apparatus wrought no more than minor damage on Italian culture. Suffice it to consider the deep chasms that opened up to swallow an incalculable number of suspended works for centuries afterwards, or the pointless destruction caused by the vacillations of censorial policy or conflicts between the Congregations. It would be an over-simplification, however, to measure the efficacy of censorship solely in terms of the losses incurred by Italy's book heritage or, as often happens when the focus is trained on 'high' culture, in terms of the peninsula's progressive isolation from the mainstream innovations of European culture. As well as these aspects, others emerge which are perhaps less striking but had wider-ranging and more enduring consequences. It was above all in the sectors of devotional books and literary works that ecclesiastical censorship seems to have had the greatest impact on the everyday lives of Italians. If, as Edoardo Barbieri shows, under the impetus of the first two Roman indexes widely circulating spiritual works underwent profound revisions and 'metamorphoses', albeit with a certain continuity, and new works more closely attuned to Tridentine spirituality appeared, one can imagine the effect on religious literature and devotional practice of the definitive banning of translations and most vernacular adaptations of the Bible, given that these were the books most commonly present in Italian homes, and the ones most frequently seized and burnt in application of the third Roman index. Judging from the lists of books consigned to the authorities on that occasion, Italians were equally familiar with certain genres of Italian literature: from narrative to chivalrous romance, to satire. Stored in the inquisitorial archives while awaiting expurgation – although this, as Ugo Rozzo's essay shows, was actually performed on only a handful of them – many popular literary works disappeared until well into the eighteenth century. That the failure to correct them was due to reluctance of the Florentine academicians to tamper with what they regarded as paragons of language and style, as well as to a systematic boycotting of escapist literature by the Roman offices, can be easily deduced from the criteria applied when it was decided whether to authorize the reading of the unexpurgated *Decameron* or *Maccaronea*: only applicants in poor health, or feeble in body or mind, were eligible for a licence to do so.³ This endeavour to

³ Cf. S. Seidel Menchi, 'La Congregazione dell'Indice', in *L'apertura degli archivi del Sant'Uffizio Romano*, Rome, 1998, pp. 32–3.

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extirpate the works with which Italians were most intimately familiar – from Bibles in the vernacular to literary texts – was not aimed at the scholarly elites, but at the ‘common’ reader, and at the illiterate who listened as they were read aloud. Far from being the preserve of religious dissidents or learned scholars, such texts were used above all by those who, unschooled in Latin, were enabled to read them by the invention of the printing press and the growing use of the vernacular in written communication. Still to be assessed, therefore, is the extent to which ecclesiastical censorship hindered religious and cultural maturation, and curbed linguistic unification, thereby influencing the reading habits of the Italians. Illuminating in this regard is the terse remark by Domenico, a cobbler of Spilimbergo, when the only three books in his possession, *Orlando Furioso*, the *Decameron* and the New Testament, were seized and destroyed by the inquisitor: ‘I swear I shall never read again.’⁴

From the perspective adopted by this book, with its endeavour to grasp the more enduring and more incisive effects of censorship on the culture and mentality of the Italians, coupling the legal texts placed on the index with the literary ones that suffered the same fate is neither contrived nor arbitrary. Rodolfo Savelli traces the tortuous itinerary of legal works through the various indexes. He provides further evidence of the conflicting positions taken up, in this sector as well, by the Congregation of the Index and the Inquisition (above all with regard to Charles Du Moulin). And he shows how, with the condemnation or suspension of certain authors or works, Rome sought to purge Italian culture of every attack on papal power, the temporal state of the Church and ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and of any and every defence of the prince’s prerogatives raised by the conciliarists, the Gallicans, the Protestants or the regalist. As Paolo Sarpi acutely pointed out at the time: ‘under the colours of faith and religion, prohibited and condemned with the same severity are the authors of books in which the authority of the prince and of the temporal magistrates is defended against ecclesiastical usurpations, and those in which the authority of the councils and the bishops is defended against the usurpations of the Roman court.’⁵ This strong anti-papal and anti-curial tradition, already manifested in the fourteenth century by Dante’s *De monarchia* and which spurred numerous writings by jurists, until the mid-cinquecento permeated a large part of Italian prose and poetry, where anti-clerical polemic and religious criticism were waged with either strident invective or under-

⁴ Quoted by S. Seidel Menchi, *Erasmus in Italia 1520–1580*, Turin, 1987, p. 447.

⁵ Cf. *infra*, p. 232.