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*Adriano Prosperi, "Una rivoluzione passiva"*

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# Adriano Prosperi, “Una rivoluzione passiva”

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Adriano Prosperi, *Una rivoluzione passiva. Chiesa, intellettuali e religione nella storia d'Italia*. Torino: Einaudi, 2022, XVIII – 430 pp.

The publisher Einaudi has issued a volume that contains eight chapters written by one of Italy's most eminent scholars of early-modern history. The works originally appeared as chapters and articles in a variety of publications over a period of almost three decades between 1981 and 2004 (p. xviii). In this publication, the complete original texts are reproduced with new titles, and with a new introduction by the author. Here, Prosperi explains how he wrote the essays, which are teeming with “episodi e figure di religiosi e letterari, di profeti e visionari [...] dare carne e sangue alle dimensioni intellettuali, ai sentimenti e alle dottrine dei conflitti dell'epoca, nonché di cogliere i caratteri originali della religione cattolica tridentina e controriformista” (pp. vii-viii). For Prosperi, the persistence of these currents from the religious world of early-modern Italy into the rural world of his own childhood four centuries later, helped inspire a lifework's search both for the roots of these currents and the history of Italy's modern identity.

In this volume, as its title encapsulates, Prosperi sees Italy's trajectory from the time of Europe's various religious Reformations in terms of a “passive Revolution”. According to Prosperi, Italy's dominant powers succeeded in resisting the threat of the Lutheran Reformation because they did not impose “un ritorno al passato ma un mutamento capace di mescolare antico e nuovo” (pp. x-xi). The resulting ‘Counter Reformation’ included mechanisms for the Church to defend itself by absorbing new elements into it and adapting to its circumstances over time, ensuring its own survival in the process.

The wide range of subjects covered by the essays both bears this argument out and takes the reader in many stimulating directions, always with an eye to incorporating into the analysis the highest to the lowest social and ecclesiastical orders of religious life, producing a fascinating and vivid portrait of the period. In Chapter 1, the relationship between intellectuals and the Church illustrates what Italy's passive revolution looked like for literary expression, providing new space in some cases and stricter boundaries in others as the Church's response to the threat of Martin Luther and the resulting Reformations got underway. Gradually, from 1540, Prosperi observes how prudence and patience increasingly became essential hallmarks of intellectuals who strove to survive with some dignity among religious and political powers that did not leave much room to move (p. 34).

From the time of the Council of Trent, Prosperi chronicles a kind of truce, even at times alliance and collaboration, between the Church hierarchy and the intellectuals of the day. Crucially, the arrangement entailed the exclusion of the lower social orders: "feste, riti, tradizioni, credenze, cominciarono a essere considerati dalle autorità ecclesiastiche dal punto di vista del pericolo di eresia e di superstizione, e quindi estirpati, corretti, incriminati." According to Prosperi, a subtle shift came later — "più tollerante in apparenza, ma più insidioso" — led by the Jesuits in the form of a new approach, "volto a conquistare dall'interno alla religione ufficiale questi aspetti del folklore" (p. 98).

While Chapters 2 and 3 look at religious life through the roles of the bishop and papacy respectively — in the latter case in connection with their relationship to the Jews of Rome over the long early-modern period until the nineteenth century — Chapter 4 resumes the exploration of Italy's literary life under the shadow of the Council of Trent and its aftermath, with respect to the Index of Prohibited Books. Here, again, Prosperi observes that the ecclesiastical sphere in Italy had made an alliance with the literary one very early on; or rather, it was the intellectuals of the day who turned to the Church (p. 169).

Literature in this essay, like the Church, is presented as a deeply enrooted element of Italian culture, society, and life generally, which unified the Italian peninsula in ways that politics did not and could not in the pre-modern age (p. 170). At the same time, something changed with the coming of the Reformation, exemplified by the Index of prohib-

ited books, which Prospero helpfully explores by adding nuance to its more usual reading as a very blunt instrument. For example, "profane" literature came off relatively lightly from the Index, for, as Prospero observed, the real war was in the field of theology (p. 173) and the truth-claims of competing theologies of the day. Indeed, according to General Commissioner of the Holy Office Michele Ghislieri, censoring secular literature risked making the authors of the Index look ridiculous, precisely because works in this genre were read, not as true accounts, but as "fables" (p. 171).

Yet the situation had become complicated, not least because, as Prospero notes, literary figures in Italy themselves tended to be more worried than theologians were about the place of literature in the religious context of the age – well before theologians came to be concerned about the issue (p. 176). Early cracks were widening however: conflict between literature and theology already emerged with the coming of the printing press and with the increasing use of published works to aid religious debate; the Protestant Reformation shone a light on this conflict, which finally produced a crisis about the place of literature in this new world of published ideas.

In a further interesting sub-topic, Prospero connects this growing tension with the history of women, since they were a key group of consumers of the new published literature of the sixteenth century, creating at the same time an imperative to control literature's content. This spilled out from the need to control women and what they read, to the need to control everyone and what they read, coinciding of course with the wider context of the threat of Protestantism (pp. 176–178).

Another problem was that the more people read spiritual, scriptural and other devotional literature, the more it became difficult to determine appropriate boundaries between these religious works — which had to be orthodox — and literary works that increasingly, it was felt, should be morally correct and by extension also orthodox. An anti-classical turn had arrived (pp. 183–185). While literature on the whole escaped the worst of the obsession with theological orthodoxy in the mid-sixteenth century, Prospero reminds us that the self-censorship of authors from this time on in some senses was even more powerful than the actual censorship of the Inquisition and the Index (pp. 188–206).

Chapter 5 is the longest in the volume, at roughly seventy pages, and

was originally published in 1995, a year before the publication of one of Prosperi's most important monographs, *Tribunali della Coscienza* (Einaudi, 1996; rev. 2nd ed. 2009). The chapter reproduced here reflects the monograph's main findings and arguments and a few key quotations from it can help illustrate its continued importance for the field. The first concerns the main subject of the article: penitence and the Catholic and Protestant battle — as well as competition — over souls and their path to salvation. The path that the Catholic Church took on the road of securing their faithful was through the promotion and application of penitence “[d]i rispondere con argomenti radicalmente consolatori al terrore della morte imminente – di quella dell’anima ben più che di quella del corpo” (p. 221). The faithful thus interiorized their religious practice, bringing stability to its external forms, and to the ecclesiastical hierarchy as well.

There were unintended and unexpected consequences for this relatively peaceful coexistence between the faithful and their Church: Italy represented a secure zone for the papacy, which paradoxically allowed some intellectual freedom, at least for high culture, and at least as long as the threat of heresy did not pose any disturbances in the struggle for power (p. 251). While the Church apparently succeeded in entering into the interior lives of Italians, their conquest was never completely uniform or complete: “questa religione dal '500, che è stata talvolta descritta come un universo compatto, avvolgente, senza alternative ([Lucien] Febvre), conobbe fratture radicali, senza le quali non sarebbe comprensibile l’altissimo investimento nell’opera di uniformazione religiosa da parte della chiesa e dei poteri costituiti” (p. 259).

The concluding comment in this chapter returns to the theme of a passive revolution, in which the Italian people were subjected to methods of ecclesiastical control that at least were preferable to those of the state: (p. 284). Theological control in Italy according to this reading was exchanged for a weaker link with the political power of the state, which was more apparent in regions where the Catholic Church did not hold sway and where ecclesiastical power had been ceded to the state.

The last three chapters of this volume are introductions to previously published critical editions and Italian translations of works written by Luther (*On the Jews and their Lies*) and Erasmus of Rotterdam (*Colloquia* and a selection of religious and moral writings). Whilst characteris-

tically valuable for their historical insights, the introductory remarks presented here as standalone chapters in parts are rather disconcerting without the accompanying texts. Likewise, a lack of editorial updating in the footnotes throughout the volume partially limits its historiographical contribution: an updated general bibliography or a select list of suggested further recent readings would have been helpful additions here. Despite these details, the overall value of the interpretive and conceptual work, as well as the vivid originality of the historical examples, episodes, and themes remain without question.

Finally, towards the end of the volume, the reader encounters the figure of Erasmus, and in particular Prospero's view of the humanist's "gentilezza", along with his unwavering "fedeltà alla strada della libertà intellettuale su cui si era incamminato fin dall'inizio" (p. 413). Anyone who knows Adriano Prospero might say the same about him and his own intellectual path.