

The Heresy Prosecution of Renaissance Scholars Domenico Scandella, Giordano Bruno, and Galileo Galilei

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The tribunals popularly known as the Inquisition have been misrepresented as a unified movement of the Catholic Church to repress intellectual progress and the scientific pursuit of knowledge. While the suppression of destructive ideas was certainly part of the Church's agenda in heresy inquisitions, the central point in these tribunals was not about the *legitimacy* of official doctrines or of the heresies contravening them. An exploration of the patterns of obedience and resistance in the trials of Galileo Galilei, Giordano Bruno, and Domenico Scandella reveals a different concern. The Church's desire was to restore even its apostates to a state of grace, and heretics who responded within this framework fared significantly better than those who would not.

Introduction

A misconception about the medieval and Renaissance tribunals collectively known as the Inquisition is that they represent a unified movement of the Catholic Church to repress intellectual progress and the scientific pursuit of knowledge. This particular falsehood is often cited in popular discourse when wanting to characterize Christianity as inherently anti-science. However, an exploration of the patterns of obedience and resistance to Church authority in the trial histories of Galileo Galilei, Giordano Bruno, and Domenico Scandella reveals a different picture. When we juxtapose these three narratives, we see a pattern in the outcome of tribunals related to the accuseds' expressions of resistance to the authority of the Congregation of the Holy Office. Moreover, we see that the decisive form of resistance was *not* in asserting the intellectual validity of their heresies, but in availing themselves of social networks *within* the framework of the Church's agenda.

Rinterpreting the Intent of Inquisitional Tribunals

Our understanding of the Holy Office's intent in bringing heretics to trial is of central importance. Henry Ansgar Kelly notes that scholars as well as laypeople regularly conflate the Church's various medieval and Renaissance prosecutorial efforts and systems into a chimera we call "the Inquisition". And, while the history of the Holy Office has included individual cases of torture and execution, Kelly concludes that acts of cruelty were in fact perversions of the inquisitional movement, rather than an accurate reflection of the Church's general mission (Kelly 1989). Richard Blackwell offers another caution in his book *Behind the Scenes at Galileo's Trial* that we should not project modern expectations about legal process onto historical tribunals. Central to the point of this paper, he identifies their *primary* intent as forcing a defendant's confession and offering reconciliation with the Church.

It is this intent that allows us a different view of resistance to inquisitional authority. The tribunals of the Holy Office did not offer an opportunity to debate whether a belief or behavior was legitimate, for the accused in a heresy trial was already understood to be guilty. In this light, we understand Kelly's observation that "actual heretics, that is, persons judicially convicted of heresy, were forbidden lawyers," because their tribunals were not conducted with the purpose of defense in mind (Kelly 1989: 445). By Blackwell's reckoning, the goal of the Holy Office was to compel the defendant in returning to the good graces of the Church. Another scholar, Andrea Del Col, echoes this: "The death sentence was reserved exclusively for the impenitent and the relapsed" (Del Col 1996: xxxix). With this in mind, it becomes clearer to us why expressions of resistance were interpreted as evidence of impenitence, of the defendants' *willful thwarting* of the Church's mission to reconcile its misguided followers. In the stories of the three heretics discussed in this paper, we see that their eventual fates corresponded to their resistance to this mission.

Ginzburg and Del Col on Menocchio

Renaissance historian Carlo Ginzburg brought the sixteenth century Friulian miller Menocchio out of obscurity in his 1980 microhistory *The Cheese and the Worms*. Menocchio was questioned about the heterodox beliefs he had been sharing with his neighbors, and was at first released under conditions of public

penitence, but eventually convicted as a recalcitrant heretic and disseminator of heresy. His execution on the order of the Roman Holy Office in 1599 demonstrates in particular the difference a retraction and recidivism can make in a defendant's fate.

The complete proceedings of Menocchio's tribunals were made available fifteen years later as the book *Domenico Scandella Known as Menocchio* by editor Andrea Del Col, who has added considerable substance to Ginzburg's ambitious interpretations. In particular, he drew upon newer scholarship for necessary background about the institutional workings of tribunals, helping to replace our caricatures of *the* monolithic Inquisition with a portrayal better contextualized in the legal traditions of Menocchio's time. Del Col is also able to demonstrate the importance of local context in the village of Montereale. While Ginzburg hoped to elevate this microhistory to a certain representative status, Del Col's work establishes the idiosyncratic nature of tribunals held in the Venetian province, and the importance of *local* relationships, such as those with the local priest, or with neighbors willing to speak up on Menocchio's behalf. Again, the outcome of a tribunal was highly contingent upon the intervention of allies or enemies within the parameters of the Church's mission.

Gatti on Bruno

A better-known figure is Giordano Bruno, a sixteenth century Dominican friar who left behind a significant body of writings spanning the subjects of cosmology, philosophy, mnemonics, religious satire, Hermetic mysticism and magic. His brutal execution for impenitent heresy in 1600 by the Roman Holy Office has made him an appealing figure for those characterizing the Church as hostile to science (White 2002). Bruno's unwillingness to recant makes his prosecution an especially vivid illustration of the Roman Inquisition's harsh response to intellectual speculations encroaching upon theological territory, and to a heretic unwilling to abjure his position.

After having formal heresy charges filed against him, the young Bruno spent 34 years thwarting inquisitional authorities by establishing himself with various sympathetic institutions and individuals. He moved from city to city, gaining patronage and teaching positions in each location, ingratiating himself first to secular officials and then falling into conflict with Catholic and Protestant authorities alike. Bruno did make occasional overtures to the Church, but was rebuffed by

the priests he approached. He wrote and published during these itinerant years, issuing some of his works most critical of the Church, the harshness which may have in fact estranged some of the allies who had earlier supported him (White 2002).

Bruno's evasion of the Holy Office came to end when he accepted an offer to Venice as tutor for the patrician Giovanni Mocenigo, who later filed heresy charges against him. It appears that it was ultimately Bruno's persistent philosophical assertions that sealed his fate, as this intellectual recalcitrance was enough for the judges to conclude that he must also be impenitent theologically (Fantoli 1996: 34, 43-44).

Hilary Gatti's volume *Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Science* notes that it was central to Bruno's defense that he presented himself as entitled to unrestrained philosophical exploration of theological territory. Gatti writes: "Bruno was claiming for the philosopher a principle of free thought and inquiry which implied a new concept of authority: that of the individual intellect in its serious and continuing pursuit of an autonomous inquiry" (Gatti 1999: 18). Because of his insistence on promoting his controversial ideas in the face of the Church's admonishment, he was considered beyond hope for reconciliation; Bruno was tied naked to a stake in a central Roman square, an iron spike driven through his tongue to gag him, and burned on February 17, 1600.

Fantoli and Blackwell on Galileo

Of course, there is no shortage of literature on the Galileo affair, and his celebrity as a heretical scientific figure has been exploited by those portraying religion as essentially anti-science. While popular history has tended to revere Galileo as a martyr, his juxtaposition with other prosecuted heretics gives us some perspective into his fate being house arrest and censorship rather than torture and death. Michael Shank notes in his review of Annibale Fantoli's book *Galileo for Copernicanism and for the Church* that Galileo's retraction was a critical factor; in light of the Dominican absolutism which evaluated disputed points only in terms of theological conformity, his willingness to bend before the authority of the judges was life-saving (Shank 1997: 105-109).

Fantoli notes that the minutes of the Holy Office did not include the content of their discussions, and he has scrutinized their *public* communications for details missed by others. Galileo appears in this work to be resigned to the network of

relationships and institutions he occupies, and strategically chooses the response that will allow him to live and continue his work, however limited. Fantoli concludes, "Galileo was neither a free-thinker who rose up against the 'obscurantism' of the Church, nor a man weakened by the trial and condemnation to the point that he preferred to remain on the side of the Church even at the expense of abandoning his new view of the universe" (Fantoli 1996: xvi). Our modern ignorance of the inquisitional system does not entail Galileo's ignorance of it.

Having acknowledged Galileo's generally shrewd realism about his options, Fantoli's detailed attention to relationships and discourse leads him to conclude that it was the Pope's feelings of personal betrayal that was *most directly* responsible for the prosecution that followed. This power of relationships in guiding Galileo's prosecution is a critical observation emerging from Fantoli's scrupulous attention to communication. Both Fantoli and Blackwell conclude that Urban's surprise at reading his own words put in the mouth of the *Dialogo's* character Simplicio was a significant motivation for Galileo's next trial and inescapable censure. Despite the goodwill he had cultivated earlier, Galileo had finally incurred the animosity of too important a character. He was sentenced to recant his support of heliocentrism, spend the rest of his life under house arrest, and have the publication of his works forbidden. Galileo's status and apparent penitence had been critical; his fate stands in stark contrast to the torture and execution of Menocchio and Bruno.

Conclusion

While the suppression of destructive ideas is certainly part of the Church's agenda in heresy inquisitions, the central point of debate in these tribunals was not about the *legitimacy* of official doctrines or of the heresies contravening them. The Church's desire to restore even its apostates was a critical factor. To the degree that Menocchio, Bruno and Galileo were willing to express contrition for their heresies, they were spared, if under often harsh penitential conditions. When these three were unwilling to compromise, however, they constituted an unacceptable threat to the Church's agenda of reconciliation, and were subject to harsh retribution. A heretic's success in resisting the authority of the Holy Office was often also influenced significantly by his social position and network of alliance, which could guide the prosecution in subtle but critical ways. However, the decisive strategy was not in convincing the judges to tolerate his het-

erodox views; it was to respond within the framework of the Church's determination to return even its heretical members to a state of grace.

References

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