Jaska Kainulainen

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The Venetian political advisor and theologian, Paolo Sarpi, has been the focus of varied interpretations by scholars beginning as early as the seventeenth century. Portrayed by some as an atheist or heretic and others as a defender of freedom, the complexity of Sarpi's writings have lent themselves to such disparate conclusions. Underlying these interpretations was a fundamental question whether Sarpi was a modern thinker or a medieval thinker in the debates surrounding the relationship between church and state, particularly as related to his experience in Venice. In this intellectual biography, Jaska Kainulainen challenges the conventional interpretations of Paolo Sarpi by focusing on his natural philosophy, religious views, and political ideas through a careful analysis of his writings. In so doing, Kainulainen examines Sarpi's ideas in light of ancient, medieval, and early modern thinkers, as well as his own contemporaries, resulting in a perspective that is new and more nuanced.

In order to advance his argument, Kainulainen consistently draws links between Sarpi and St. Augustine, who not only influenced his religious outlook, but also his political ideas. The author argues effectively that Augustine's concept of the depravity of human nature, which manifested itself in political instability, led to Sarpi's advancement of absolutism, providing an "element of order amid chaos" (56). Thus, Sarpi's natural philosophy, and the foundation of his political thought, rested on two inter-related insights that can be traced, according to the author, to Augustine: the instability of nature and the imperfection of man. While Sarpi credited absolute power to secular rulers, a conclusion acknowledged by several scholars of his works, Kainulainen understands Sarpi's absolutist ideas within the context of a republic. The author claims that Sarpi's absolutism needs to be understood broadly and not necessarily as an endorsement of a monarchical form of government. Rather, his notion of absolutism is best understood as a "set of principles, according to which rulers were accountable to God alone, their commands were to be obeyed, and thirdly, they were not to be resisted by their subjects" (212). Interpreting Sarpi's absolutism in this way, Kainulainen concludes that this was compatible with a republican form of government, such as that found in Venice.

The impact of Augustine on Sarpi's religiosity leads the author to examine the conclusions put forward by many scholars, as well as some of Sarpi's contemporaries, that he sought either a Protestant Reformation in Italy or embraced atheism. Kainulainen acknowledges that Sarpi was critical of the

papacy, and the church in general, for having lost its original apostolic simplicity. His anti-papal sentiments grew out of a rejection of the temporal authority of the pope, which he saw as the cause of many of the political problems of the day. Giving expression to this view in his writings, particularly his *Pensieri*, has led to the interpretation that Sarpi was an atheist, and even more radical than Luther and Calvin. Kainulainen takes exception to both of these views. Regarding Sarpi's alleged atheism, the author contends that any criticism directed against church leaders in the early seventeenth century "led to accusations of atheism" (129). More significantly, Kainulainen argues that the *Pensieri* have been misinterpreted, stating that these writings were not about God or the nature of God, but rather about the pope, and exemplify Sarpi's consistent treatment of papal power as the source of political turmoil. Kainulainen demonstrates that in the *Pensieri* Sarpi not only takes for granted the existence of God, but seeks to answer whether knowledge of God "was obtainable by reason or by faith" (130).

In terms of Sarpi's desire for a reform based on Protestantism in Venice, and in Italy in general, Kainulainen challenges this interpretation from a political perspective. He places Sarpi within the broader context of sixteenth-century religious and political discourse, comprised of humanist reformers who, while critical of the church, remained members thereof, and Protestant reformers, who broke from it. The author does not deny that Sarpi was sympathetic towards some aspects of Protestantism—for example, his acceptance of *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*, two of the pillars of the Reformation movement. However, he argues that there is no evidence in his writings that Sarpi ever considered converting to Protestantism. While Kainulainen attributes this to his "enduring Catholicism," he presents a more compelling argument that derived from Sarpi's political ideology. The author contends that Sarpi recognized that a change in religion would result in a change in the established political system, which "would have meant too great a peril for the religious and political status quo" (136). Consequently, Kainulainen argues that any type of religious reform for Sarpi had to be moderate, and more importantly needed to rest on an existing creed, which in the case of Italy was Catholicism. In this way, Sarpi was more in line with the reformers of the Catholic Reformation than the Protestant Reformation. The author highlights Sarpi's praise of three reforming popes—Marcellus II, Adrian VI, and Urban VII—an indication of a vision of reform within the church occurring under papal auspices. In addition, Sarpi's focus on revival of the early church and a return *ad fontes* (the Scripture and Church Fathers) placed him squarely within the agenda of such humanists as Erasmus, who did not break from the church, but labored for

reform from within. While Kainulainen makes reference to this affinity, developing this continuity of thought more fully than he does would have strengthened his interpretation.

Based on an analysis of the historiography that has emerged around the person of Paolo Sarpi, along with a fresh reading of his writings, Kainulainen offers a novel and valuable interpretation. Of particular interest for scholars engaged in Jesuit studies is Kainulainen's contention that Sarpi had a dislike for the Jesuits, an argument that is interwoven throughout this study. This antipathy, the author argues, stems from Sarpi's political and religious views. While acknowledging certain modern elements of his thought, such as his separation of the temporal from the spiritual (reflecting his engagement with secularist thought), Kainulainen ultimately concludes that Sarpi's mindset was that of a medieval thinker who placed enormous value in the concepts of coherence and unity, and adhered to Aristotelian science. Furthermore, Kainulainen presents Sarpi as one who submitted himself to service to God, itself a medieval concept, which first manifested itself as service to the church as a Servite friar, and later as service to the state as an adviser to the Venetian senate. The author concludes that Sarpi's appeal to medieval writers—such as William of Ockham, Jean Gerson, and Nicholas of Cusa—along with his references to St. Paul, St. Augustine, and many of the early Church Fathers, places his writings within the medieval tradition, supporting an understanding of Sarpi as a conservative thinker who was instinctively opposed to any novelty.

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