Adriano Prosperi

La vocazione: Storie di gesuiti tra Cinquecento e Seicento. Turin: Einaudi, 2016.

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“All history is contemporary history” wrote the Italian idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952). Much of the long career of Adriano Prosperi, doyen of Italian early modernists, has been concerned with explaining to his readers (and himself) how Roman Catholicism not only resisted the ideas of Protestantism in the sixteenth century but also colonised the consciences of the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula and thereby shaped the destiny of a nation. The cost of this unifying victory was nothing less than the “defeat” of the Italian people, who allowed themselves to be persuaded that acquiescence to the hegemonic power of the church was a price worth paying for the avoidance of religious war; a conclusion that was shared, incidentally, by Croce. Prosperi’s argument is expressed in the full title to his opus magnum: *Tribunali della coscienza: Inquisitori, confessori e missionari* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996; reprinted with a new preface in 2009), which identifies the three principal architects of this victory/defeat: the network of holy tribunals of the Roman Inquisition (which Prosperi considered to be Italy’s first “national” institution); the sacrament of confession (which was now conducted in the privacy of the confession box by priests equipped with manuals for confessors of unprecedented detail and thoroughness) and the work of missionaries (working in small teams and making dramatically theatrical use of spectacle) mainly to the rural hinterlands of the Italian peninsula, referred to evocatively at the time as “the other Indies.”

Since members of the Society of Jesus were leading protagonists in two out of the three processes: as confessors and as missionaries, it is only logical that the Jesuits should be an abiding concern of this son of Tuscan farmers and former altar boy, who as a very small child (b.1939) was direct beneficiary of the vital role played by the church in attending to the physical needs of a starving and broken people, who from 1943–45 had effectively been abandoned and betrayed by their political masters; their country host to an army of Nazi occupation which was fighting a brutal rearguard action against an American-British invasion force and its citizens engaged in a bitter civil war. As Prosperi noted in the moving preface to the first edition of *Tribunali della coscienza*, it is thus not to be wondered that at such subsequent times of crisis as the kidnap and murder of the Christian Democrat prime minister of Italy Aldo Moro by Red Brigade terrorists in 1978, the country turned in its grief and shock not to the other members of the Italian governing cabinet of ministers or even to the president of the republic as head of state, but to Moro’s friend, Pope Paul

vi, who led the mourning at the funeral Mass which was conducted in Rome's cathedral, St. John Lateran.

Readers familiar with Prosperi's brilliant portrait of "The Missionary," one of the regrettably few of his writings available in English translation (in Rosario Villari ed., *Baroque personae* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995], 160–94), whose picture of the "apostolic [Jesuit new] man" is compared with the enthusiasm and method displayed by members of the Italian Communist Youth Federation (FGCI), whose heyday coincided with Prosperi's own adolescence, will not be surprised to find explicit comparisons being made in the "proemio" of his latest book between the education strategies deployed by the Jesuits and by the Communists (xiv–xvi). The specific focus in this most recent volume of Prosperi's autopsy of victory/defeat is provided by the autobiographies that individual Jesuits were ordered to write by their superior. Prosperi explicitly credits the study of the uses of autobiography in the cultural formation of militant communists by Mauro Boarelli (*La fabbrica del passato: Autobiografie di militanti comunisti (1945–56)* [Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007]) for having "reawakened and given shape to the long-standing interests of he who writes [this book]" (xvi). Boarelli focuses on the similarities between the self-criticism demanded of Jesuits by regular confession and that demanded of communist militants by the party hierarchy. In another striking parallel, both groups demanded of their members unquestioning, absolute obedience as well as the desirability that they give written as well as oral expression to their autobiographical narratives. But where Boarelli merely makes a suggestive comparison, Prosperi, building on his long familiarity with the Jesuit archives in Rome as well as the classic account by Lorenzo Gilardi ("Autobiografie di gesuiti in Italia (1540–1640). Storia e interpretazione" *Archivum historicum Societatis Iesu* 127 [1995]: 3–37) together with the recent article by Miriam Turrini ("Poco oltre la soglia. Racconti autobiografici di aspiranti gesuiti a metà Seicento," *Studi storici* 55 [2014]: 585–614), whose expertise he generously acknowledges, analyses the series of volumes *Vocationes illustres* containing autobiographical writings of Jesuits 1540–1640, in *Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu*, *Hist. Soc.* 176–77, together with the autobiographical writings of such early, leading protagonists as Juan Alfonso de Polanco, Francisco de Borja, Jerónimo Nadal as well as, of course, those of Ignatius Loyola himself.

The book is divided into three sections. The first is devoted to the role such autobiographical writings of vocation/conversion played in the construction of the collective memory of the Jesuits; the second, to the fundamental role played by Jesuit colleges in enabling vocations and the third, with the various kinds of vocation including a brief section on those who subsequently

lost their vocations. Section one begins with the autobiography of perhaps the most prominent of the “second [generation of] Jesuits,” Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), which Prosperi analyses with a view to making the important point from the outset: that such “autobiographies” were not autobiographical in any conventional sense of the word, but were rather documents written at the behest of the Father General for future use by those charged with writing the history of the Society. As such the resulting narratives smoothed out any uncertainties and hesitations in order to emphasise the precocity and decisiveness of their subjects’ vocation. The next chapter takes the reader to the prototype for all the other autobiographical narratives: that of Loyola himself, in which Ignatius is referred to throughout in the third person—as “the pilgrim.” Indeed, movement was to be such a feature of the career of members of the Society that these writings, together with the system of communications they both presupposed and developed, were central to the identity of every Jesuit, as Markus Friedrich has shown in numerous articles (culminating in his monograph: *Der Lange arm Roms? Globale Verwaltung und Kommunikation im Jesuitenorden, 1540–1773* [Frankfurt: Piper, 2011]). The rest of part one includes discussion of that “fishing net” for catching vocations that was the *Spiritual Exercises* (to borrow the phrase of the seventeenth-century Jesuit historian Daniello Bartoli). Given their importance not only for ascertaining the vocation of so many of the most talented men of early modern Catholic Europe, but also for their continuing (at least annual) role in structuring the spiritual lives of the members of the Society, it is frustrating that their precise genealogy is still elusive, as readers of Prosperi’s article “The Two Standards” in this journal (2015/2, 361–86) will already know. The final chapter of part one (vi) considers the decision taken by the third superior general, the Belgian Everard Mercurian in 1575 to instruct all provincials to collect and send to Rome in a systematic fashion not only autobiographical accounts of conversion but also of the latter’s antitype: accounts of those who lost their vocation and left the Society. This forms a bridge to the second section, which shifts focus onto the role played by Jesuit colleges in forming of the vocation of those who wished to enter the Society. One of the distinctive features of Jesuit educational strategy was to provide not only pre-university (“high school”) training, but also tertiary-level teaching, so that the Society had its own universities where its members could complete their education without having recourse to institutions such as Paris’s Sorbonne, which jealously guarded its pre-eminence and whose sustained hostility to the Jesuits contributed in no small measure to their expulsion from France in 1594. The first edition of Pedro de Ribadeneyra’s list of works authored by his fellow Jesuits, the *Catalogus scriptorum religionis* (Antwerp: Plantin, 1603) is testimony to the very breadth of their intellectual

curiosity and accomplishments: encompassing not only biblical commentary, patristics, moral theology and hagiography, but also mathematics, logic, oratory, geography, history, and politics.

Beginning with Chapter IX, more than half of Prosperi's book is given over to consideration of individual case studies of vocation/conversion. Their very variety should guard us against the tendency in some quarters to essentialise the Jesuits and view them in monolithic terms. That said, some stock figures do emerge from such narratives: in particular, the hostile father or mother for whom their son's decision to enter the Society threatened the continued integrity of the family patrimony. Such was the case, for example, not only with Robert Bellarmine's and Luigi Gonzaga's fathers—though in the former case his mother was of a contrary opinion. The admittedly rarer opposition of the mother can also be seen in the unusual example of the Jewish convert, who took the name Giovanni Battista Eliano, whose actions were regarded as a betrayal of his duty and destiny as a future potential leader of the Jewish community in Venice. Prosperi also includes reference to “the one that got away”—Federico Borromeo—whose plans to join the Society in Bologna were brought to an abrupt end owing to the decisive intervention of his older cousin, Carlo. In the case of René Ayrault, his father—a learned jurist—published a treatise denouncing the Jesuits for what he considered was their undermining of that pillar of political order: paternal authority. This work was repeatedly reprinted and translated into not only French but also Italian. Of particular interest is Prosperi's all too brief discussion of those who were dismissed (Ch. xv). Evidently, of those who entered the Society in Italy between 1540–65, no fewer than 35% subsequently left: 25% of these left (or were dismissed) as novices; 46% during the first seven years and 29% after at least ten years in the Society: a breakdown which gives some idea of the variety of motives and circumstances that came into play. A slightly later, particularly striking example of why one candidate decided to leave was the Saxon-born Christian Francken, who entered the Society in Vienna in 1568 at the age of sixteen. In his *Colloquium iesuiticum* (Leipzig: Hans Steinmann, 1579), which was published after he left the Jesuits, Francken explained how his reading about Japanese religious customs led him not to desire martyrdom in the Indies, but to the conclusion that all religions might merely be human constructs and that Christians were no better than idolaters and pagans.

So this is a book essentially about conversion narratives, which in recent years have undergone something of a historiographical renaissance; as reflected in such projects as “Conversion narratives in Early Modern Europe” at the University of York in the United Kingdom and the major “Early Modern Conversions” initiative based at McGill University in Canada together with their re-

lated conferences, workshops, and publications. Central to all these initiatives has been the belief that we need to move beyond the cliché that has traditionally identified the advent of autobiography with Protestantism; specifically the first-person narratives authored by radical Protestants in the seventeenth century. Prosperi might perhaps have taken a few paragraphs in either his introduction or conclusion to locate explicitly his own contribution in relation to this wider historiographical revisionism. In this way, the significance of his demonstration that narratives of conversion/vocation—and, more rarely, reconversion—were also central to the *esprit de corps* of the religious order that remains identified more than another other with Protestantism's spiritual "other": the Counter-Reformation, would have been more apparent. However, as I have argued at the start of this review, by viewing this book in its specifically *Italian* historiographical context we can better understand the author's personal agenda for writing it. "All history is contemporary history."

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