CHAPTER 12

The Editorial History of a Rare and Forbidden Franciscan Book of the Italian Renaissance: The *Dialogo della Unione Spirituale di Dio con l’anima* by Bartolomeo Cordoni

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The early decades of the Cinquecento witnessed a proliferation of religious publications in the Italian vernacular. In the second half of the century the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and the founding of the Roman Congregations of the Holy Office (1542) and of the Index (1572) would halt the consistent and substantially uncontrolled development of devotional and spiritual literature. But in the generation before this a huge number of pamphlets and books, “from the more traditional to the more innovative”, flooded the markets of the Italian peninsula, with considerable impact on the religious thought and practice of both clergy and laypeople.¹ As has been pointed out, spiritual books acted in those years, alongside with popular preaching, as effective vehicles for religious propaganda and for the dissemination of new ideas.² They promoted not only the doctrines introduced by the German and Swiss Reformation, but also the anti-dogmatic spirituality and the reform proposals elaborated by Italian evangelical groups clustered around such leading figures as the Venetian cardinal Gaspare Contarini and the Spanish *alumbrado* Juan de Valdés, or by the representatives of the most dynamic religious gatherings of the age, from

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the lay confraternity of the Divino Amore to the new religious Orders of the Barnabites, the Jesuits and the Capuchins.³

Closely connected to the early development of the Capuchins is the printing of one of the most intriguing mystical booklets of the European Renaissance period, the Dialogo della unione spirituale di Dio con l’anima by Bartolomeo Cordoni. Despite the censorship of the Roman and Spanish Inquisitions, from the 1530s the book went through several editions in Italy and in Spain and continued to circulate until the first half of the seventeenth century. Its complex editorial history, which this article will attempt to reconstruct, represents a meaningful case of ‘editorial longevity’ and deserves, for this reason, specific attention.⁴

The book was written by the Observant Franciscan mystic Bartolomeo Cordoni from Città di Castello, a former follower of the humanist Angelo Poliziano. Cordoni was a member of that rigorist movement which, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, promoted the reform of the Order of the Friars Minor through asceticism and hermitic contemplation, inspiring Spanish alumbradism and Italian pre-quietism.⁵ Published for reasons of prudence after the death of its author in 1535, the Dialogo della unione is undoubtedly an heterodox text, since it combines the radical spiritualism of the Franciscan tradition, with the neoplatonic mysticism of the Mirror of the

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