THE ITALIAN ANTITRINITARIANS

Joseph C. McLelland

The subject of Antitrinitarianism in the Reformation is well documented, but perhaps patient of further examination in light of Peter Martyr Vermigli’s life and thought. We begin with »the myth of Italy« as context, then turn to some key players in the theodrama, including Vermigli’s own response.

1. »The Myth of Italy«

It was Antonio D’Andrea who spoke of »the myth of Italy« to illustrate the Renaissance image of a mixed, even contradictory, set of qualities and attitudes towards the peninsula. In particular he draws attention to the role played by Geneva, including its Italian congregation, in fostering this image. The issue involves not only the suspicion of Italian rationalism and speculation, but also the role of Machiavelli, at least of what he was taken to stand for against the opposition of the Church of Rome. For instance, the 1560 Latin edition of »The Prince« was translated by Silvestro Tegli and published by Pietro Perna, both of whom

---


3 D’Andrea, Italian Community, 54. Perna published two of Vermigli’s works, the commentary on Romans (1558) and the Defence against Smith (1559).
belonged to the Italian refugee community: »their aversion to intolerance had taken them first from Italy to Geneva, and then from the strict orthodoxy of Genevan theocracy to Basel.«

A signal event in this regard was the publication in 1576 of Innocent Gentillet’s »Discours sur les moyens de bien gouverner [...] contre Nicolas Machiavel Florentin«. This Huguenot now settled in Geneva, aware of the Italian influence in France, attacked Machiavelli and Italians in general, who are »de nation et de Religion Machiavellistes.«\(^4\) Such French anti-Italian sentiment had characterized Calvin’s own period in Geneva. He considered Italy a »nation tordue et pervertie,« whose intellectuals played with God: »quibus nimium familiare est cum Deo ludere«. He disdained their frivolity, Nicodemism and rationalizing, the last resulting in Antitrinitarianism.\(^5\) His intense quarrel with rationalists such as Gentile and Biandrata, who charged the Swiss reformers with Arianism, made him look to Vermigli as chief support and ally.\(^6\)

No doubt this was Calvin’s reason for wanting Vermigli to take over the Italian church in Geneva. The congregation’s pastor, Count Massimiliano Celso Martinengo, died in 1557.\(^7\) The church elders, after balloting by the membership, invited Vermigli to succeed him; they were supported by English exiles living in Geneva as well as by Calvin himself. But the Strasbourg Senate refused to let him go. Nevertheless, Vermigli served as Calvin’s chief ally in the struggle with Servetus and the Italian Antitrinitarians.

Calvin himself had been accused of Antitrinitarianism by »the theological Church adventurer« Pierre Caroli.\(^8\) Like Melanchthon before him (the 1521 »Locii«), the »Confession de la foy« (1537) of Farel and

\(^4\) See Pamela D. Stewart, Innocent Gentillet e la sua polemica antimachiavellica, Florence 1969.

\(^5\) See D’Andrea, Italian Community, 59–60; cf. Rotondà, Calvino, 57–86.


\(^7\) He had been a member of the Augustinian community in Lucca, teaching Greek in the Academy. He continued as a Nicodemite until 1551 when he fled to Geneva, becoming first pastor of the Italian congregation. See Josias Simler, Oratio, in: Peter Martyr Vermigli, Life, letters, and sermons, transl. and ed. by John Patrick Donnelly, Kirksville, Mo. 1999 (The Peter Martyr Library 5 / Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies 42), 45f.