Lucia Felici


For many years, not to say centuries, Italian historians paid little attention to the Reformation north of the Alps and continued to ignore those of their compatriots whose Protestant sympathies had either driven them to emigrate or secured them a trial by the Inquisition. Even Spain seems to have fared better. The very first efforts to study the so-called Spanish heretics were made by foreigners, Eduard Boehmer and Benjamin Wiffen in the 1860s, but within less than twenty years Menéndez y Pelayo had published his *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles*, and before the century was out Julio Melgares Marín edited part of the trial of María de Cazalla. In Italy the process started far later. Giovanni Gentile published his important study on Giordano Bruno in 1925 and, in the following year, Gioacchino Volpe produced his *Movimenti religiosi e sette ereticali nella società medievale italiana*, admittedly about an earlier period, but nevertheless, together with Gentile’s book, the source of inspiration for Delio Cantimori. With Cantimori’s *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento* of 1939 a movement developed which has been expanding and prospering ever since. The late Antonio Rotondò was generally regarded as Cantimori’s successor and his pupils have made major contributions both to the study of heresy in sixteenth-century Italy and to the study of some of the Reformers north of the Alps. Of these pupils Lucia Felici, whose first monograph was a study of Martin Borrhaus, is one of the most distinguished.

At first *La Riforma protestante nell’Europa del Cinquecento* appears to be a conventional history of the Reformation with the necessary set pieces which have become an essential part of the genre: a discussion of Rome as seen by the first Reformers—a centre of scandalous corruption—followed by sections on Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, and the Anabaptists. This changes with Chapter Five on the Reformation in Italy. Professor Felici has been able to benefit from the many studies produced in recent years to give a detailed survey of the effects of Protestantism in the peninsula, and these effects are far more considerable than was once suspected or acknowledged. The doctrine of justification by faith, which had had such a strong appeal for a number of princes of the Church—Contarini, Seripando, Giberti, Cortese, Morone, Pole and others—would permeate Italian society on every level. In the past certain cities were regarded as peculiarly ‘infected’—Lucca, Modena, Bologna, Mantua, Venice, and Udine—but Lucia Felici shows that there was barely a city in Italy that was spared—Milan, Cremona, Genoa, Siena, Naples, and the cities of Sicily all harboured substantial groups of dissidents. Sardinia alone seems to have resisted heresy consistently.
The spread of the new doctrines begs two questions. What sort of Protestantism did the Italians select? And if the Reformation was so popular why did Italy never become Protestant? Judging from the surviving trials the Protestantism of the Italians, as one might expect in the case of a nation so far removed from the centres of dogma in Northern Europe, was extraordinarily hybrid and covered a wide spectrum of views and a variety of forms of behaviour. In Naples, in the last years of his short life, Juan de Valdés proselytised in a relatively small circle of aristocratic and influential admirers, but, despite their acceptance of justification by faith and the type of spiritualism which emerges so clearly from Valdés's later writings, very few of them were prepared to break with Rome. Widely regarded as Nicodemites or simulators, they, like Valdés himself, tended to remain loyal to the pope. Of course there were exceptions, such as Giulia Gonzaga's admirer Pietro Carnesecchi, a frequent visitor to Lyons and Geneva and finally executed by the Inquisition as a relapsed heretic. And Giulia Gonzaga herself had embarked on her journey of spiritual exploration as a result of the sermons delivered by the Italian archheretic Bernardino Ochino who fled from Italy in 1541 and spent the rest of his life wandering across Europe in search of a congenial Protestant community (which he never found). Elsewhere in Italy the commitment of Protestant communities and the readiness to break with Rome was greater—Lucca is an example—and led to emigration. But the evidence is frequently evasive and can lead all too easily to speculation. Did Valdés really influence the frescoes of Pontormo in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence? No trace of the frescoes remains and we might well wonder how the essentially spiritual message of Valdés could be translated into pictorial images.

By the 1570s Protestantism had been virtually eradicated in Italy. Why? The Inquisition certainly played an important part in the process, but inquisitions had not always been so successful as we see from the Netherlands. Italian rulers such as the duke of Ferrara, who had long succeeded in protecting his subjects from the Inquisition, ultimately proved incapable of resisting pressures from the papacy, as did the duke of Tuscany. After protecting him for many years and benefiting from his loyalty, the Medici duke handed Carnesecchi over to the Inquisition in order to curry favour with the pope. All this would suggest that, apart from the numerous emigrants to Northern Europe, the commitment to Protestantism of the Italians who remained in Italy was more shallow than it might have been. Then there is the social aspect. It has frequently been observed that Protestant sympathies were regarded as the prerogative of a small élite. In fact Lucia Felici shows that in a number of areas these sympathies spread over much of the social scale, but the question remains of whether they sunk deep enough. And finally we might wonder about a traditional sense of