Review Article

A Conscious Ambiguity: The Jesuits Viewed in Comparative Perspective in the Light of Some Recent Italian Literature

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In 1999 a special issue of Revue de Synthèse, edited by Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Antonella Romano, brought to the attention of the academic community the possibilities of new ways of using the incredibly rich sources produced by the Society of Jesus in the early modern period.1 This promising

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historiographical renewal consisted of the ‘opening up’ (désenclavement) of
the study of the Society so that it was no longer simply viewed in terms of
the history of the Church or in those of the Jesuits’ own, confessionalised
self-presentation. Instead, the Society and its members became the privi-
leged vantage point for understanding a modernizing, European world
in formation; an observatory embracing ‘social history, intellectual history
together with the histories of science and of theatre, of European expa-
nsion as well as of education and art.’ This has not involved denying the
historical fundamentals of a religious order, but rather by following the
careers of many intellectuals, who as members of the Society had worked
outside it, shows how the Jesuits contributed to the formation of early mod-
ern Europe. The essays considered below exemplify the variety of approaches
and the insights this new way of regarding the Society has generated.

More recently, owing precisely to this new approach, contacts between
scholars on both sides of the Alps have become more frequent. On the one
hand, this has encouraged conferences and workshops involving French
and Italian scholars. On the other, at the same time it has stimulated a
reassessment of the Italian contribution. This may be viewed in the context
of the vibrant historiographical tradition dealing with the religious history
of the Italian peninsula in the sixteenth century, which continues to enjoy
the attention of young researchers. In particular, if one considers the con-
siderable effort in recent years to analyse the complex relations between
the different institutional protagonists within the Roman Catholic Church
of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (councils, papacy, cardinals’
congregations—with particular attention being dedicated to the Congre-
gations of the Holy Office and of Prohibited Books—as well as religious
orders both new and old)—one can well understand how study of the
Society of Jesus has become enriched by means of these new points of
view. To be sure, a major historiographical ‘opening up’ has also occurred
in this area, whose main feature has not been to emphasise the role of
the Society in the progressive secularisation of European society, so much
as to offer a (sometimes demythologizing) contextualization of the part the

2 Fabre and Romano, ‘Présentation/Introduction,’ 253.
3 E.g. the collection of seminar papers given in 2002 published as “Anatomia di un
corpo religioso,” a special number of the Annali di storia dell’esegesi, 19/2 (2002) and the
international conference organised at the Ecole française de Rome also in 2002 and now
published as: Paolo Broggio, Francesca Cantù, Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Antonella Romano
eds., I gesuiti ai tempi di Claudio Acquaviva: strategie politiche, religiose e culturali tra cinque
e seicento, (Brescia, 2007).