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Spiritual journeys and the fashioning of religious identity in Renaissance Venice

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Towards the end of December 1552 Lorenzo Tizzano – a medical student at the University of Padua and for the past two months a prisoner of the Venetian Inquisition – wrote out in his own hand a confession in which he provided, as he put it, a narrative of ‘all the errors and heresies which I have held in the past’.¹ The document Lorenzo produced provided the papal legate to Venice with a detailed account of a remarkable spiritual journey. A former Benedictine monk at the abbey of Monte Oliveto, Lorenzo had sought and had been granted permission, in 1530 or so, to leave his order and to serve as a chancery priest in Naples. Like many others who eked out modest incomes reciting Masses and hearing confessions, Lorenzo moved frequently from church to church until some years later he received a prized position as chaplain to Catherina Sanseverina, the sister of the prince of Bisignano. Here, in this courtly world, Lorenzo first met Juan de Valdés, the celebrated Spanish reformer, whose conversation and writings would eventually lead him to break with the Roman Church and to embrace a complex array of heresies. ‘And in order to distinguish better among my opinions, which have been diverse’, he wrote at a crucial juncture in his confession, ‘I shall distinguish them in a threefold manner: the first I will call Lutheran; the second I will call Anabaptist; and the third, since I know of no name more fitting, I will call diabolical.’²

Perhaps Lorenzo’s theological education made it possible for him to offer the Venetian Holy Office such a lucid typology. He went on to describe how Valdés’s writings and other ‘Lutheran’ books, as well as his conversations with a number of other Neapolitans, had led him not only to reject the papacy, purgatory, the cult of saints and sacerdotal confession, but also to embrace Protestant views on predestination and the relationship between grace and works. But, for Lorenzo, as for many others, these beliefs were merely the first step towards more radical notions. After Valdés died, Lorenzo came under the influence of the Spaniard Juan de Villafranca and Abbot Bruno

I am grateful to the British Academy for funding my travel to present this paper at the conference ‘Conformity and Dissent in Renaissance Venice’ (London, March 1994).

¹ Lorenzo’s confession is printed in Domenico Berti, ‘Di Giovanni Valdes e di taluni suoi discepoli secondo nuovi documenti tolti dall’Archivio Veneto’, *Atti della R. Accademia dei Lincei*, 275 (1877–8), 3rd ser., *Memorie della classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, II, 67–81; see, for the material cited here, p. 68.

² *Ibid.* 69.

Busale.³ Now he not only denied the real presence; he even went so far as to deny that Jesus was the eternal son of God, born of the Virgin, and maintained instead that he was simply one of Joseph's and Mary's children, born as others are born – a view that placed him closer to antitrinitarian than to purely Anabaptist beliefs. But his heresies did not end here. Some two years later, under the influence of Francesco Renato, Lorenzo came to believe that Jesus had not been the Messiah, but that the Messiah was yet to come. And to this decidedly millenarian belief, Lorenzo added that he had also become convinced that the soul dies with the body until God raises it up from the dead at the Last Judgement.

Lorenzo might well have persisted in these views had it not been for don Pietro Manelfi, a fellow antitrinitarian and Anabaptist, whose confession in October 1551 prompted the Venetian government to repress the widespread network of Anabaptists in the Republic.⁴ Frightened by the arrest of four friends with whom he shared a house in Padua, Lorenzo fled, first to Venice, then through Ferrara and Piacenza before reaching Genoa where '[he] resolved to return to Padua and his studies, and to start going again to confession and to mass'.⁵ Back in Padua, Lorenzo at first made his peace with the Catholic Church on the basis of his confession to his parish priest. But two years later – on the verge of receiving his medical degree and in all likelihood with rumours still circulating about his earlier 'errors' – he sought absolution from the Inquisition in Padua. When the father inquisitor read Lorenzo's detailed confession, he immediately recognized its importance and forwarded it to his superiors in Venice. From there the papal legate notified Rome and in the meantime held Lorenzo in jail. The Holy Office's request that he write out in his own hand a second confession was probably an inquisitorial strategy to ensure that Lorenzo was telling the truth. His testimony, after all, had implicated a wide range of Italian courtiers and humanists in the most compromising heresies of the day.

For some time now I have been fascinated by Lorenzo's confession. In part, my interest in his journey stems from the fact that the typology of Italian heresies he put forth in his written confession corresponds quite closely (though not perfectly) with the reform currents I distinguished, on the basis of different documentation, in *Venice's Hidden Enemies*, a social and cultural history of heresy in this sixteenth-century city.⁶ For in Venice too, evangelical, Anabaptist or antitrinitarian, and millenarian currents defined the essential contours of religious dissent in the mid-sixteenth century. Moreover,

³ On Lorenzo's relationship to Valdés and especially to such figures as Juan de Villafranca, Bruno Busale and Francesco Renato, see Massimo Firpo's introduction to his edition of Juan de Valdés, *Alfabeto cristiano* (Turin, 1994), cxxvii–cxxxiv.

⁴ Manelfi's confessions are printed in Carlo Ginzburg (ed.) *I costituiti di don Pietro Manelfi* (DeKalb, Ill. and Chicago, 1970).

⁵ Berti, 'Di Giovanni Valdes e di taluni suoi discepoli', 68.

⁶ *Venice's Hidden Enemies: Italian Heretics in a Renaissance City*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture, no. 16 (Berkeley, Calif. and London, 1993).

in the case of Venice, many heretics might have told a story quite similar to Lorenzo's. Many individuals passed first from Catholicism to evangelical or Protestant positions; of these, several would take the further step of becoming Anabaptists and antitrinitarians; and, indeed, some would become millenarians.

Again and again in the records of the Venetian Inquisition, we encounter individuals who passed not merely (like the Neapolitan Lorenzo Tizzano) from Catholicism to a form of Protestantism, but rather those whose religious identities were never fixed, never completed. Such journeys, in other words, did not always involve just a progressive radicalization of beliefs. This aspect of the Italian Reform is apparent in the lives of such celebrated figures as Bernardino Ochino and Fausto Sozzini, and also in the experience of a wide range of less well-known *eretici*⁷ – as we see, for example, in the vacillations of Francesco Spiera, who moved from Catholicism to Calvinism; who then renounced his heresies; and who finally, after expressing remorse over his abjuration, died convinced that he would go to hell.⁸ We see something of this also among the Nicodemites, those heretical figures who were able to conform outwardly to Catholicism while harbouring Protestant beliefs or tendencies secretly within.⁹ Contemporaries were certainly aware of the extremes to which such religious individualism could go within the context of the reform movements in Italy. In one of his Venetian sermons, Ochino drew the attention of his listeners to the '*gran confusione*' of his time: 'Almost everyone', he asserted, 'has his own set of beliefs. Articles, sects, heresies, faiths, and religions have so multiplied that everyone wishes to treat faith after his own manner.' In 1542 another reformer – a layman by the name of Baldassare Altieri, who was active in dissenting circles in Venice – also lamented the religious individualism of his times. 'We do not have public churches', he observed; 'everyone is a church unto himself, according to his own individual whim and will.' And in 1570 Alessandro Trissino – a Vicentine nobleman who lived in Venice from 1558 to 1561 and who, after his trial for heresy in 1563, fled to Chiavenna where he eventually became pastor – echoed these views. 'But observe, most dear brothers, by remaining outside of God's church, you are still deprived of the Word of God . . . See how many Anabaptists, how many Arians, how many Servetans, Libertines, and other heretics there are among you.'¹⁰

⁷ Delio Cantimori, *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento: ricerche storiche* (Florence, 1939).

⁸ The literature on Spiera is enormous: for an orientation, see M. A. Overell, 'The exploitation of Francesco Spiera', *Sixt Cent J*, 26 (1995), 619–37.

⁹ Carlo Ginzburg, *Il Nicodemismo: simulazione e dissimulazione religiosa nell'Europa del '500* (Turin, 1970).

¹⁰ Ochino, 'Del modo di liberarsi dalla confusione di tante fedi, sette e modi di vivere', in *Opuscoli e lettere di riformatori italiani del Cinquecento*, ed. G. Paladino (Bari, 1913), 1 263; Altieri, in Martin Luther, *Werke: Briefwechsel* (Weimar, 1947), x 204–5; Trissino, 'Ragionamento della necessità di ritirarsi a vivere nella Chiesa visibile di Gesù Cristo, lasciando il papesimo', in Achille Oliveri, 'Alessandro Trissino e il movimento calvinista vicentino del Cinquecento', *Riv Stor Chiesa in Italia*, 21 (1967), 100–1.

There was, in short, something extremely malleable, or restless and individualistic, about many of the reformers or heretics in Italy. In the Italian Reform, I am suggesting, it is not enough to line individuals up on one side or another of the religious battlelines of the sixteenth century. For very often we find individuals passing over these lines, drifting from heresy to heresy (what St Augustine centuries earlier in his *Confessions* had called the 'circuitus errori mei'). Furthermore, these were neither marginal nor exceptional figures. On the contrary, the prominence of these figures in the Italian Reform was one of its defining characteristics. In a famous observation on the Reformation, the great French historian Lucien Febvre remarked, '[a] fertile, elementary age was bound to produce something more than an opposition between a well-co-ordinated Protestantism on the one hand and a well-expurgated Catholicism on the other'.¹¹ Yet we still have little understanding of this aspect of the religious life of sixteenth-century Italy: of how individual reformers fashioned and refashioned their beliefs, or of how they defined themselves both in relation to the various heretical and orthodox currents of the day and in relation to the particular social and political worlds they inhabited.

But how do we make sense of it all? Social factors certainly played a role. In the case of Venice at least, religious choices were closely related to social experience. Among evangelicals, class (construed both as an economic and as a cultural category) significantly shaped divergent religious and social views – resulting, among patricians and prominent merchants and professionals, in a conservative and elitist movement that made no demands for changing either the social or the political order and, among shopkeepers and skilled craftsmen, by contrast, in a popular sentiment that appealed to the ideal of equality. Similarly, class was at work in shaping the Anabaptist vision. To be sure, the Venetian Anabaptists came from diverse social backgrounds. Within the Anabaptist movement in northern Italy as a whole, a certain elite, made up of humanists and tutors, former priests and friars, notaries and physicians, constituted a visible and activist minority. But workers, primarily poorer workers at the lower end of the social and economic hierarchies, formed the overwhelming majority. For the most part these men were cobblers, textile workers, tailors and sword smiths (or former sword smiths). And a sizeable percentage (at least in contrast to the evangelicals) were illiterate. As a consequence, they belonged to a social world with few connections to the more powerful and privileged members of their society. Moreover, their immediate political experience made the passage from evangelical to more radical positions in the late 1540s relatively easy: the disillusionment that came with the collapse of evangelical hopes for reform combined with an experience of poverty and a reading of the Gospel

¹¹ Lucien Febvre, 'The origins of the French Reformation: a badly put question', in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Lucien Febvre*, ed. P. Burke and trans. K. Folca (New York, 1973), 86.

that led them to place their hope in alternative political and religious arrangements. Salvation was to be a matter of special communities of true believers, whose baptisms would be a sign of their willingness to share with, and to assist one another, in every way.¹²

Yet while social history both allows us to grasp something of the interplay of social life and religious ideas and offers at least a plausible characterization of the Venetian heresies – one that doesn't reduce the Venetian movements to ultramontane developments – it fails, in my view, to illuminate a central aspect of the history of heresy and reform in sixteenth-century Italy: namely, the extraordinarily restless and the apparently protean character of many of the lives of individual reformers. For one thing, the sources make it clear that the kinds of shifts I have explored and attempted to explain took place not only in Venice but also elsewhere in Italy, where social and political forces were quite different. For another, traditional approaches to social history are, by definition, limited. Some years ago the German historian Bernd Moeller drew attention to this aspect of social historical analysis in his famous essay 'Imperial cities and the Reformation'. 'Who would assert', he wrote, 'that human decisions, and especially decisions regarding theology, law, or church politics, can be explained simply with sociological data? Instead, these decisions were motivated by both personal and impersonal factors, like temperament, the sense of responsibility and spontaneity, as well as external influences and constraints of various sorts, in such a way as to form an inexplicable nexus.'¹³

Moeller's observation is of great historiographical interest, first because it underscores the fact that social history has traditionally drawn a clear, if artificial distinction between social life on the one hand and ideas on the other; and, secondly, because it nonetheless gestures – albeit vaguely – to a sense that social and religious life are more tightly bound up with each other than traditional analytical models suggest. And yet, while we might not be able to cut, at least we might begin untying Moeller's Gordian Knot – his *nicht auflösbares Geflecht* – by shifting our focus to a consideration of the ways in which early modern Italians sought to define themselves, and, in particular, of how they negotiated the tensions between their own sense of who they were (their identities) and the constraints that they felt from fellow courtiers or even fellow merchants and artisans to conform (or not to conform) to one or more of the often conflicting religious ideals of the day. My assumption in this exploration is that Moeller's nexus is best thought of in terms both of identity *and* of what the Renaissance literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt has recently called 'self-fashioning'.¹⁴

¹² See *Venice's Hidden Enemies*, especially ch. 6, 'The place of heresy in a hierarchical society', 147–77.

¹³ Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation*, ed. and trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr (Durham, N.C., 1982), 83.

¹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London, 1980). Unlike Greenblatt, I attempt here to treat identity and self-fashioning as distinct concepts.

Certainly issues of identity were central to the experience of Gasparo Contarini, perhaps the most prominent Venetian to embrace evangelical ideas. Born in 1483, Contarini studied philosophy and theology at the University of Padua before 1509, when he came into close contact with Tommaso Giustiniani and Vincenzo Quirini, like him members of the Venetian patriciate. All three young men felt profound malaise over the crisis in spiritual values and religious institutions in early sixteenth-century Italy. Whereas Giustiniani and Quirini chose to leave Venice and enter the monastic life of a Camaldolensian house near Arezzo in Tuscany (where they would write their celebrated proposal for the reform of the Church, the *Libellus ad Leonem X*), Contarini searched rather for a new spirituality that would allow the Christian to remain in the world; and he found it – in ways strikingly similar to those that Luther was about to discover and to render so familiar – in his recognition that his own efforts alone would never be enough for him to achieve salvation even if, as he wrote in a letter to his friend Giustiniani, ‘I did all possible penance and much more besides’.¹⁵

Contarini died in 1542, only one month after Pope Paul III established the Roman Congregation of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. As a result, he was never constrained to choose, as many of his younger contemporaries were forced to do, between Luther and the pope. On the contrary, he was able to fashion a far more ambiguous persona. And it seems likely that the intensity of his experience as a young man – faced with the challenge of his friends’ decision to enter a monastery and of his resolution finally that he could go on living in the midst of the city and its politics – gave Contarini a strong sense of self – a relatively clearly defined identity – which, paradoxically, made the need to mask or to equivocate all the more tolerable.

In an early letter to Giustiniani, Contarini described something of the process by which he forged precisely this confident, relatively strong sense of self – the identity that would serve him so well in his later struggles. With disarming honesty, he laid out the nature of his dilemma to his friend. He was painfully aware of the gulf that separated his outer from his inner life. ‘Although outwardly I seem to you to have qualities for which I deserve to be loved’, he wrote, ‘alas, if you knew me inwardly as I really am, and as even I don’t know myself, you would not judge me [as favourably] as you do’.¹⁶ But Contarini also described how he had come to re-evaluate the relationship of his own inner self to salvation. In the course of a long, Holy Saturday conversation with his confessor at his church in Venice, Contarini had come to see that ‘the way of salvation was broader than many people think’, that Christ had died for the salvation of the sins of all ‘who desire him for their guide and want to be members of the body of which Christ is the head’.¹⁷

¹⁵ Contarini, letter to Paolo Giustiniani, 24 April 1511, in *Contarini and Camaldoli*, ed. H. Jedin (Rome, 1943), 14. On Contarini, now see the superb biographical study by Elizabeth Gleason, *Gasparo Contarini: Venice, Rome, and Reform* (Berkeley, Calif. and Oxford, 1993).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Gleason (ed.), *Reform Thought in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Chico, Calif. 1981), 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25–6.

It was an insight that led to a fundamental adjustment in Contarini's sense of himself and of his ability to act in the world. In the balance Contarini had struck between his outer and inner life, divine grace became a guarantee that he would not lose his soul in the life of the city. He could carry out his duties faithfully first as Venice's ambassador to the imperial court of Charles V, later to the papal curia, and, from 1535 on, as a cardinal of the Roman Church, all the while knowing that his spiritual life – what he saw as the core of his personal identity – could not be compromised by his public duties. Such an identity, at once confident and well defined, provided the ballast necessary (and much ballast was needed) to navigate successfully in the Renaissance courts of sixteenth-century Europe where the pressures to compromise one's convictions were so great that prudence became the leading virtue of the day. For the prudent Contarini, evangelism made a public life possible, both because he did not need to question his own identity and because he had defined his own sense of self in a profoundly personal, almost private way.

For many Italian reformers, especially those whose lives were spent in the courtly orbits of Renaissance popes and princes, evangelical ideas must have served just such a function, allowing them to fashion public selves that could be worn rather lightly over private identities. This is not to deny, as Greenblatt has argued, that self-presentation in the Renaissance court 'always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self'.¹⁸ At times, the effacement could be extreme. Guicciardini, for example, after expressing his dislike for the priesthood, gives some evidence for this process of alienation in his observation in his *Ricordi*: '[a]nd yet the position I have filled under several Popes has obliged me for personal reasons (*per el particolare mio*) to desire their greatness. But for this I would have loved Martin Luther as myself.'¹⁹ But a prudential ethic also allowed for the preservation of one's integrity even within the intricate webs of patronage politics at the Italian courts. In the century of Castiglione, della Casa and Guazzo, Italian aristocrats and patricians were more than a little conscious of the necessity for prudent dissimulation. As Rita Belladonna has demonstrated in an insightful and suggestive series of articles, the Sienese nobleman Bartolomeo Carli Piccolomini's *Trattato della prudenza*, in its stress on the need for the individual 'to project an impressive image of himself, training himself to be all things to all men, while at the same time preserving his own inner freedom and remaining detached from the world in spite of his dealings with it', forms an exact parallel to Carli's explicitly nicodemite argument that the reformed Christian should 'conform to what others [do] on the outside but internally to do whatever the spirit inspires [one] to do, addressing everything to Christ'.²⁰

¹⁸ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 9.

¹⁹ Francesco Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, with an English translation by Ninian Hill Thomson (New York, 1949), ser. II, no. 28.

²⁰ Rita Belladonna, 'Aristotle, Machiavelli, and religious dissimulation: Bartolomeo Carli Piccolomini's *Trattato nove della prudenza*', in *Peter Martyr Vermigli and the Italian Reform*, ed. J. C. McLelland, 1980, 31–2.

It is my view that Protestant and especially evangelical ideas facilitated this goal. They did so not only because of the way they positioned themselves in relationship to the praxis of power: that is, not only by their opposition to Catholic tradition on the one hand and their submission to Scripture on the other. To be sure, both of these elements were essential components of Protestant and evangelical thought. But equally important was the stress the early reformers – and here I have in mind individuals as diverse as Luther, Valdés and Contarini – placed on grace. One's identity, that is, was beyond one's control; it was a gift from God, a continually replenished foundation of forgiveness that made action in the world, the *vita activa*, possible. Such an identity – let me be clear – was itself a construction, but a self so constructed could withstand the pressures of court even when one's external role was a constant object of observation, of approval and disapproval. After all, Gasparo Contarini did not define himself purely in relationship to his roles as ambassador and as cardinal. He also carried within himself an identity forged in an earlier struggle over the question of whether or not it was possible for an individual to reject monasticism and yet be saved. There is, in short, a personal history, or an archaeology, of the constructed self that makes it difficult to view the definition of the individual as a function solely of one's submission to the pope or to a prince even in such an authoritarian age as the sixteenth century.²¹

Curiously it was precisely the studied ambiguities of courtly self-presentation that most aggravated Lorenzo Tizzano. Here was a young man who deeply desired to know what those around him stood for. In the manuscript confession he prepared for the Venetian Holy Office in December of 1552, he described the frustration he felt in his dealings with his fellow heretics: 'I was not able to gather from them whether they believed these things or not, because they are very cautious individuals, who don't make their views known . . . and about fra Geronimo, for example, I wouldn't know how to tell you what he has resolved, because he seems very inconstant, and that which he seemed to believe one day, he doubted the next.'²² Later, when interrogated by the Holy Office, Lorenzo made a similar point in his description of the bishop of Pozzuolo who had exasperated him in much the same way: 'He used to ask me about these Lutheran and even Anabaptist opinions, and I would answer him and tell him what I believed, and at times he would remain quiet, and at times he would laugh about it, and I just don't know how to judge if he accepted or consented to these things or not, because he is a person who is always joking and bantering in such

²¹ Here too I take issue with Greenblatt, whose notion of the constructed self tends to reduce identity to a function of power. Greenblatt asserts in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 80 that '[t]he individual conscience as a fertile field of knowledge is at least in part the product of a complex operation of power – of watching, training, correcting, questioning, confessing'. I am concerned to discover what it is that this process leaves out. At the very least, Greenblatt's formulation – to use theoretical shorthand – sacrifices Freud for Foucault.

²² Berti, 'Di Giovanni Valdes e di taluni suoi discepoli', 71.

a way that one cannot gather what it is he feels in his soul.²³ Indeed, though it is only a glimpse, Lorenzo provides evidence that he had always sought a life that allowed its external manifestations to express – or at the very least not to be inconsistent with – his internal convictions. For this had been the central dilemma of his life as a monk. He was not meant, he wrote in his confession, for the monastic life ('non poteva comportare quella vita'). He had become a monk, he continued, 'to please his mother' ('per satisfare a mia madre'). It was in fact after she died that Lorenzo was released from the monastery and was given licence to serve as a secular priest in Naples. Lorenzo, therefore, placed enormous importance on the transparency of identity. Thus, in contrast to Contarini, his spiritual journey was largely a quest for a religious idiom and a community in which he might present himself without compromise, without equivocation.

Many of the Italian reformers who passed from evangelical to more radical positions shared Lorenzo's view that faith required such transparency, the stripping away of all pretence and all the social fictions that courtly evangelicals willingly accepted. Though his confession is less explicit, Giovanni Laureto di Buongiorno, who had been a monk at Monte Oliveto at the same time as Lorenzo, appears to have been looking for a similar way in which he could express his identity publicly. After embracing Protestant and evangelical ideas in Naples, he had hoped at first to go to Germany, but he ended up instead at Piacenza, in the court of Isabella Bresegna. While there he was converted to Anabaptist views by the Abbot Bruno Busale; subsequently, while studying Greek and Hebrew in Thessalonica, he made himself a Jew. Perhaps he believed that circumcision would serve as an even more unequivocal marking of membership in a well-defined religious community than adult baptism had.²⁴ Don Pietro Manelfi appears to have been on a similar quest. At least, as Manelfi represented his spiritual journey to fra Lorenzo de Albertis, the inquisitor at Bologna, his earlier 'conversions' were not the result of sudden inspirations. On the contrary, in each case social pressures appear to have played a prominent role. It had been Bernardino Ochino and two of his fellow Capuchins who had originally convinced Pietro that the Roman Church was diabolical. In Florence some years later, don Pietro would have a similar experience with a group of Anabaptists. He portrayed himself as the reluctant convert, finally persuaded that their beliefs were true. His antitrinitarian position likewise grew out of a meeting of northern Italian Anabaptists in Venice in 1550.²⁵ Perhaps it is not an accident that both Giovanni Laureto di Buongiorno and don Pietro Manelfi were 'spontecomparentes' – individuals who volunteered their confessions to the Inquisition. This ritualized confession, with its opportunity to record in

²³ *Ibid.* 74–5.

²⁴ Giovanni Laureto di Buongiorno's testimony is printed in M. E. Pommier, 'L'itinéraire religieux d'un moine vagabond italien au XVI siècle', *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'Ecole française de Rome*, 66 (1954), 317–22; for the material cited here, see p. 316.

²⁵ Ginzburg, *I costituti di don Pietro Manelfi*, 31–4.

narrative form one's errors and heresies and to beg for the Church's mercy, allowed repentant heretics to identify themselves with a particular, visible *ecclesia*. Their experience suggests that it is usually other communities and other faiths – and not one's own community and faith – that seem to allow for the sincere expression of the individual's beliefs.

Although he did not volunteer to make a confession before the Venetian Holy Office, the Anabaptist Francesco della Sega, originally from Rovigo, nonetheless provided the Inquisition there with a rich narrative of his life. Francesco had the bad luck to be arrested at Capodistria on 27 August, 1562, just as he was leading a group of Italian Anabaptists out of the Venetian Republic to Pausrum in Moravia where, for the past several years, he and his fellow Italian Giulio Gherlandi had been living in the *Bruderhöfe* established there by exiles from Switzerland, Germany and the Tyrol. Francesco's original interrogation before the Inquisition had not gone well. Accordingly, as he wrote in his memorial to the Venetian Holy Office, he was pleased that he had been granted 'the opportunity to write about his faith' – though in the very next paragraph (in one of several rhetorical moves that shifted the legitimate authority to judge an individual's soul away from worldly authority) Francesco added that the 'grace, favour and memory that allowed one to write about one's faith and life' came directly from God.²⁶

As a young man, Francesco continued, 'my father put me in Padua so that I would study law and become a man of reputation (*homo da reputation*) and do what I could to enlarge the family lands. And at the same time I didn't let up from having a good time and enjoying all the pleasures of the flesh such as dancing, partying, whoring, feasting, drinking, and other foolishness.'²⁷ Yet this life was not for Francesco; he recognized this during an illness when he began to read Scripture earnestly, seeking salvation. At first he was unable to reform himself, as he stated in his confession, 'because I had grown to despair, and there was nothing I enjoyed doing'.²⁸ It subsequently became clear to Francesco that he had to make a radical break. He left the university and lost friends and family. 'My father chased me out of the house because I had stopped studying law, telling him that it was better to learn a trade and earn a living with one's hands and by the sweat of one's brow than to do so through litigation and contention. And those who had at first been my friends became my enemies, because I did not wish to go out with them any more, or be like them, and as a result they all started to make fun of me.'²⁹

It is of course impossible to know if events unfolded precisely as Francesco recalled them. But what is of interest here is that in his presentation of himself to the Holy Office, he chose to stress the degree to which his religious choices

²⁶ Aldo Stella, *Anabattismo e antitrinitarismo in Italia nel XVI secolo* (Padua, 1969); see especially pp. 258–9.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 259.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 260.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 260.

had set him off from his father and his friends. Contarini had achieved some sense of self – of identity – in his conflict with Quirini and Giustiniani; and Lorenzo Tizzano's sense of self had been shaped to a large degree through his own conflict with the monastic vocation – a life imposed on him more by his mother than out of a sense of calling. But we have no evidence in either of these cases of a break so total with the individual's past as we see in the story Francesco tells about himself. Contarini's process of defining himself, of developing a sense of his own identity, may have exacerbated the tensions between himself and some friends, but it certainly did not cost him his family. Similarly, Lorenzo's efforts to reclaim what he saw as his own identity by leaving the monastery may have stemmed to a certain extent from the misperception he believed his mother had of him and his role, but there is no suggestion here that he needed to sacrifice friends in this process. Both these men, that is, carried a relatively strong sense of who they were into their adulthoods. But Francesco's break with his past was total, and it is perhaps this that explains why ultimately he felt compelled, first, to try to forge a new identity for himself as an exile among the 'fratelli' of Moravia, and, secondly, to choose martyrdom as the final means of defining and asserting who he was and what he stood for. As Greenblatt has noted in the very different cases of the Catholic Thomas More and the Protestant William Thorpe – both martyrs to their faith – such an act involves nothing less than 'a simultaneous affirmation and effacement of personal identity'.³⁰

As useful as it is to analyse the relationship of identity to religious beliefs and practices in the lives of such figures as Gasparo Contarini, Lorenzo Tizzano and Francesco della Sega, the historian faces a decidedly more difficult task in trying to understand the roles of identity and self-fashioning among merchants and artisans, or even among the majority of those school-teachers and physicians who took up heretical beliefs, themselves often passing from 'error to error'. While the inquisitorial sources are often helpful, they rarely allow for a direct analysis of how these individuals defined or fashioned themselves in the context of Renaissance Venice. Sources that are as immediate, for example, as Contarini's and della Sega's letters, or even the detailed confessions Tizzano and later della Sega prepared for the Holy Office in Venice, are unfortunately the exception, not the rule.

Nonetheless it seems likely that religion was increasingly a central means by which Venetian merchants and artisans self-consciously represented themselves to one another. Even when they did not denounce heretics to the religious authorities, traditionally Catholic craftsmen often came together to complain of the ramblings of a heretic. And, in so doing, they set themselves apart quite clearly from those who chose to criticize or even break with Rome. Heretics, in turn, often made conscious decisions to set themselves off from their Catholic neighbours and fellow workers. Furthermore,

³⁰ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 77.

since the world of nonconformity was itself fissured, the heretics drew rather sharp distinctions among themselves. When questioned by the Inquisition, the Venetian cobbler Giacomo da Sacile, for instance, appeared more upset that his own conventicle had been conflated with the Anabaptists than he was to have been brought before the Holy Office in the first place.³¹ And we learn also of tensions between evangelicals and millenarians, whose basic outlooks on the nature of religious experience also clashed sharply.

But such groups not only set individuals off from others, they also brought groups of artisans together and provided a sense of belonging. We see this with special clarity in the case of a group of evangelical craftsmen that met frequently in the parish of San Moisè. Its members had come to know and to trust one another in the course of practising their trades, as well as in such social settings as the tavern and the confraternity. A prominent member of the conventicle at San Moisè was the goldsmith Iseppo. When the inquisitor asked him if he knew others who had also been named as heretics, he responded that he did. Together with Antonio delle Celade, he had served as an officer in the Scuola di San Fantin or della Giustizia (the confraternity whose members accompanied the condemned to their executions); he had made a gold chain for the cobbler Bortolo; exchanged services with the turner Jacomo and his son Bernardo; and purchased various goods from the jeweller Alvise dalle Crosette.³² Such business ties evidently provided such men with a measure of mutual trust; but it is equally possible that shared religious convictions led these individuals to do business with one another.

To be sure, there was little that was new in the important role religion played in defining the social and political lives of Italian merchants and artisans. What was new was the profusion of heresies, the increase in the number of religious possibilities, and the consequent difficulties of choice and self-definition that artisans and merchants faced in this Renaissance city. In the city as in the court, evangelism had the advantage of a certain ambiguity. In Italy in the age of the Reformation, that is, artisans, like courtiers, could fashion religious identities that served to define their relationships with others. From such a perspective, 'social life' is not necessarily prior to questions of identity; indeed, the distinction traditionally drawn between social and intellectual history begins to break down. And surely the role of a businessman or craftsman in a city like Venice was as complex as the role of a courtier. How one presented oneself to fellow merchants and artisans (not to mention individuals in other social classes), to fellow Venetians, to Neapolitan and Milanese Catholics, to German and French merchants (some reformed, others devout Roman Catholics) required enormous sensitivity to language and considerable skill in the rhetoric of equivocation.³³

³¹ *Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Sant'Uffizio*, busta 22, dossier 'Contra Odoricum Grisonum et complices', testimony of 16 May 1567.

³² *Ibid.* busta 7, dossier 'Contra denunciatos pro hereticis de contracta Sancti Moysis'.

³³ On ambiguity and identity in Renaissance social relations, see the insightful essay by Ronald F. E. Weissman, 'The importance of being ambiguous: social relations, individualism, and identity

Conversely, those Italian artisans who were attracted to the new religious ideas of the sixteenth century must have felt enormous relief when they knew they were with others who genuinely shared their views; when they were, in short, with those with whom they could speak frankly and sincerely. The kinds of religious choices that Venetians made, therefore, were often profoundly individualistic, at least in the sense that such choices spoke quite plainly about how they saw their own positions in Venetian society and how they wished to be viewed by their families, friends, and neighbours. Thus, the self-fashioning of artisans and merchants, like that of their better-known counterparts, was a function simultaneously of their own personal history, their social and political experience, and the highly variegated mosaic of Renaissance urban culture. In a city as marked by social and economic change, and at the same time as cosmopolitan, as sixteenth-century Venice, it is hardly surprising that this cluster of forces invested the Italian heretics with a decidedly individualistic and protean quality. As Bernardino Ochino had observed in the early 1540s, 'everyone wishes to treat faith after his own manner'.

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in Renaissance Florence', in *Urban Life in the Renaissance*, ed. S. Zimmerman and R. F. E. Weissman (Newark, Del., 1989), 269-80.