

Lutheran Reform in the Venetian Republic

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Attention to Lutheran reforms was soon awakened in the territory of the Venetian Republic. The earliest indications come from the diaries of the patrician, Marin Sanudo. From this source we learn that, in 1520, government authorities, at the behest of the patriarchal vicar, had prohibited the reading and possession of Luther's writings and had seized those that a bookseller of German origin had had delivered from Germany to sell in Venice. However, Luther was already known and esteemed on the lagoons. Also in the same year, 1520, a German aristocrat who had entered the monastery and taught theology in Venice among the Franciscans, Burckhard von Schenk, said that ten copies of his work had already been sold in the city. Again in 1520, the case of Andrea Baura (or Bauria), an Augustinian from Ferrara, already known as a 'Lutheran' who preached in Campo Santo Stefano, attacking the pope and the Roman Curia, was closed. In the following years, Venetian printers contributed actively to circulating the Lutheran message many books. These included: the *Libretto volgare* (1525) and the *Libro de la emendatione et correctione dello stato christiano*, a translation of Luther's appeal *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* (1533); the *Principii de la Theologia di Ippofilo da Terra Negra*, a translation (1530-1534) of the *Loci communes theologici* by Melantone; the translation of the Bible by Antonio Brucioli, printed for the first time in Venice between 1530 and 1532; the *Trattato utilissimo del beneficio di Gesù Cristo crocifisso verso i christiani*, printed in Venice in 1543 after it had circulated in manuscript form. This text was included in the first Venetian catalogue of banned books (1549). The writings of Erasmus would later suffer the same fate, and would be made available to Venetians by the intervention of local printers. This all demonstrates how the demand of the public that could read the vernacular (as opposed to Latin) was rising and that it was quite interested in religious matters. Throughout the territory of the Venetian Republic, not only in the capital - where the circulation of new doctrines was favoured by the cosmopolitan character of the city and the presence of many German merchants who circulated around the Fondaco named for them - the ideas of the Reformation at least raised attention and interest. In many cities, as well as small outlying towns, small clandestine philo-protestant, secret circles sprang up although they generally lacked a precise physiognomy of doctrine.

The repression

In any case, repressive provisions were quick to be taken. The first two bonfires of Lutheran books (an all-inclusive term that referred to anything pertinent to the Reformation) were burned in 1524 and 1527, respectively in San Pietro di Castello and at Rialto. In 1533, a certain Antonio 'maragon', a Lutheran or an Anabaptist, was sentenced to prison. In 1541, the Franciscan Girolamo Galateo died in prison, where he had been confined for his reform-inspired preaching. In the same year, Giulio della Rovere (or Giulio da Milano), an Augustinian hermit,

was incarcerated for the heretical content of his Lenten services; however, in 1543 he succeeded in escaping and crossed the Alps. In 1547, Baldo Lupetino, a Franciscan originally from Albona, was sentenced to life imprisonment but was put to death in 1556 for the religious propaganda that he conducted among the prisoners. Another martyr of evangelical faith was Bartolomeo Fonzo, a Franciscan and probable translator of the *Libro de la emendatione*, author of some religious writings that have survived, who was put to death in 1562. The diffusion of Anabaptism was the cause of great concern to rulers because of its social and political implications. In October 1550, the representatives of this doctrine met in Venice for a synod convoked to heal the fracture provoked by the emergence in the heart of the movement of the Nontrinitarian doctrine. The following year, the betrayal of a former follower, Pietro Manelfi, opened the way to a systematic persecution that succeeded in crushing the Venetian Anabaptism movement by death, abjuration or emigration of its members. The execution of heretics was done publicly on the Veneto mainland, usually by burning at the stake or decapitation. In Venice, however, to avoid giving the heresy inappropriate publicity and, at the same time, to maintain the Republic's reputation for tolerance, executions were conducted secretly by strangling in prison or, much more frequently, by night-time drowning at sea. The death sentences for heresy pronounced in Venice during the 16th century were not very numerous, perhaps a total of less than thirty, although it is impossible to establish the exact number, just as it is impossible for the other territories subject to the Republic. Of all the inquisition courts active in the Veneto area - and each diocese had its own tribunal - the only archives that are currently accessible are those of Venice, Udine and Rovigo, but even in these a part of the material has been dispersed. There had been an inquisition tribunal, composed of three noblemen, in Venice from 1249. Its duty was to report heretics to the episcopal authority. Between the 14th and 15th century, the activity of this tribunal continued to diminish due to the disappearance of heretical phenomena of any importance. When, on 21 July 1542 Paul III Farnese instituted the *Congregazione romana del Sant'Uffizio* with the papal bull *Licet ab initio*, the Venetian Inquisition also became a tribunal that depended directly on Rome. It did have an unusual physiognomy, however: in addition to the three ecclesiastical members - the patriarch, the papal nuncio and the inquisitor - the Venetian Sant'Uffizio also included, from 22 April 1547, three lay members of the aristocracy, called Deputies (or Sages) on heresy.

Contrasts between Venice and Rome

When the peril of heresy had disappeared, Venice decided to limit the authority of the Inquisition at the end of the 16th century. In recent times, moreover, the relations between Veneto and the pontiff had been deteriorating for non-religious reasons, above all because of the Republic's tendency to transfer ecclesiastical properties into lay hands.

The contrasts came to a head in 1606 with interdiction flung down on Venice by pope Paul V: Leonardo Donà, a catholic of rigid orthodoxy but just as firm in his defence of the rights of the Republic, and the scholarly Servite, Paolo Sarpi was called upon to sustain him. Much has been said about the true spiritual physiognomy - extremely evasive in reality - of this prelate who was in contact with various Italian and foreign intellectuals, both catholics and reformers, who was violently opposed to the Jesuits and held Protestant powers such as England and the Dutch Republic in great esteem. Some scholars have attributed him with a project to detach

Venice from the Roman rite, to induce it to organise an autonomous Church on the Anglican model. However, having resolved the controversy with Rome by means of a compromise in 1607, the anticlerical sentiments and the consequent sympathy for the Protestant world that the episode had stirred up in a significant part of the Venetian political and intellectual elite gradually died down. In 1657, the Jesuits who had been expelled during the interdiction crisis, were readmitted to the city. For the rest of that century and the next, until the fall of the Republic, the Venetian *Sant'Uffizio* concerned itself much more with cases of superstition, magic and atheism than with Protestantism.

A Venetian, if a believer (religious indifference was rampant at all social levels), could not fail to identify fully with the Roman faith. Between 1647 and 1651, after a period of internal contrasts that resulted in the defeat of the Calvinists by the Lutheran majority, the German Protestants of the Fondaco organised themselves into a regular community, with a minister.

Collapse of the Venetian Republic and annexation to the Kingdom of Italy

In 1806, after the collapse of the Republic and the annexation of Venice to the Kingdom of Italy, the community was forced to leave the Fondaco of the Germans, assigned to another function, and it was only in 1812 that it succeeded in obtaining, despite the protests of the ecclesiastical authorities, the assignment of an ancient confraternity, the Scuola dell'Angelo Custode in Campo SS Apostoli, for their place of worship. The new Lutheran church was solemnly inaugurated in 1813. It was only at the end of the century that the Anglican Church was officially founded in Venice. In 1898, a small group of English residents in Venice, guided by Sir Henry Layard, purchased a building in Campo San Vio that would become, according to the statute drafted the previous year, 'the English Church of Venice', for the use of the English and of Americans resident in Venice or just passing through. The church, dedicated to St George, is entrusted to a chaplain. Despite the limited number of English and American residents in Venice, the church is always filled by the many tourists who visit the city every year. For a stable reform presence in Venice, it was necessary to attend the annexation of the Veneto region to the Kingdom of Italy. This was realised by the Waldensians who, on 17 February 1848 had obtained civil and political rights from Carlo Alberto, including the right to leave their valleys freely. In 1866, Pastor Giovanni Davide Turin began a work of evangelisation in Venice with meetings held in his home. The Waldensian Church was officially founded in Venice with the name of the Italian Evangelical Church at Christmas 1867. The pastor was then Emilio Comba, to whose passion for historical research we owe the two-volume work, *I nostri protestanti*, published at the end of the past century but still useful to scholars of the Reformation in Italy. On Christmas Day 1868, the new seat of the church in Palazzo Cavagnis in Campo Santa Maria Formosa was inaugurated. The ground floor place of worship was inaugurated in 1908. Preaching activities were very intense in Venice and on the mainland, despite the reactions of extreme intolerance by Catholics. In 1885, discussions began about the opportunity to grant women the right to vote in church meetings. This right was granted in 1910, while women obtained the right to hold office in 1943, with the election of deaconess Rosetta Marchesan. The Free Christian Church was present in Italy in the years 1840-1850, and in Venice from 1880 with a place of worship at Cavalletto near Piazza San Marco. In 1890, it took the name of the Italian Evangelical Church. It was probably in 1875 that the Episcopal Methodist Church was

founded in Venice. From 1881, meetings between the members of these two churches and the Waldensians were held. Relations were more difficult, at least at the beginning, with the Baptist church, present in Venice from 1870. The Free Church was later absorbed by the Methodist Church.

From the Fascist regime to today

Although it was regarded as potentially suspicious, the Waldensian church did not officially oppose the Fascist regime, not even when the laws of racial discrimination were promulgated. A Methodist pastor, Anselmo Ammenti, did publicly oppose the doctrine, but some prominent Waldensians, such as Davide Giordano (a surgeon and politician), openly supported in the official policies. However, among the individual members of the church, many dissented. The memory of Guido Colonna Romano is still fresh in Venice: for many years an elder of the church, he was deported first to Poland and then to Germany from 1943 to 1945. From 1968, in Venice the Waldensian and Methodist churches were served by the same pastor, Giovanni Scuderi. In 1977, the fusion was approved and in 1979 the two churches were united. In Venice today, both have their seats and place of worship in Palazzo Cavagnis, while the building at Cavalletto was sold in 1978. To meet the needs of the growing community of church members on the mainland, in 1959-1960 it was necessary to establish a place of worship in Mestre as well, today situated on Via Felice Cavallotti. At the end of the 1940s, the first encounters between Evangelicals and Catholics were organised almost clandestinely, with the sole participation of Maria Vingiani, the future founder of the Ecumenical Activities Secretariat. The relations and the collaboration between the two faiths drew closer during the 1960s with the contributions of Pastor Renzo Bertalot and Reverend Germano Pattaro. Today, the ecumenical commitment of the Waldensian and Methodist churches is expressed mainly through the participation (together with the Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran and Orthodox churches) in the annual week of prayer for Christian unity and other occasions for prayer such as Holy Friday or Whit Sunday. From 20 December 1993, these seven churches have united to form the local Council of Christian Churches in Venice, the theological foundation of which is based on article 1 of the Statute of the Ecumenical Council of Churches with headquarters in Geneva. It operates in close contact with the San Bernardino Institute of Ecumenical Studies of Venice.