

# ANABAPTISTICA



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***Translator's Preface to Massimo Firpo's  
"Religious Radicalism: from Anabaptism  
to Anti-Trinitarianism"***

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I remember sitting in my second church history class, listening to my professor lecture about the Reformation, and asking him if there had been a reformation in Italy, like in Germany, Switzerland, France, and England. My learned professor informed me that there had been, but that it had been short-lived. A few years later, while visiting my parents in Milan, I entered the Mondadori store on via Marghera seeking to find some book on the Italian Reformation. The sales associate referred me to the only book on the subject that he had in the store: Massimo Firpo's *Riforma Protestante ed Eresie nell'Italia del Cinquecento* (San Donato Milanese: Editori Laterza, 2004).

In this 160-page book, Firpo gives a quick, well researched summary of the Italian Reformation, from its origins and the role played by major cities, major Reformers, and major documents, to its premature end. While its style is typical of many Italian academic works (paragraph-long sentences with imbedded quotes in sixteenth-century Italian or Latin), it is very accessible and presents a plethora of information in a very succinct way. Ending this very helpful, little volume is the tenth chapter: "Religious radicalism: from Anabaptism to Anti-Trinitarianism." This was the first I had heard about Italian Anabaptism, and knowing Paige Patterson's and Emir Caner's interest in the topic, I quickly proceeded to make a rough translation of the content of this chapter for them. Little did I know at the time that this would be the genesis of my interest and research on the topic of Italian Anabaptism.

What follows is an updated translation of this tenth chapter. While it was not always the case, when possible, Italian phraseology was preserved in an attempt to convey the full intent of the original author, as was the original Italian grammatical structure, resulting in many English run-on sentences. All quotations in the translation parallel quotations in the text, which quote original sources in sixteenth-century Italian or Latin. Titles of works were left in their original form, but are sometimes followed by a translation in square brackets for the benefit of the Anglophone reader.

Now that I am acquainted with the works of Cantimori, Cantu, Gastal-

di, Rotondò, Stella, and many others, and having spent a significant amount of time studying the works of Camillo Renato, I admit that I am not in total agreement with Firpo's narration. Nevertheless, I find it very beneficial as an introduction to the topic and to the key persons associated with Italian Anabaptism. I also greatly appreciate how Firpo's portrayal allows the reader to feel the theological and social tensions that these Italian reformers had to deal with as they struggled to make sense of Scripture, philosophy, and life. I pray it will be beneficial to you also and will bring a renewed interest to this little known part of church history.

**Firpo, Massimo. "Religious Radicalism: from Anabaptism to Anti-Trinitarianism." In *Riforma Protestante ed Eresie nell'Italia del Cinquecento, 143-60*. San Donato Milanese: Editori Laterza, 2004.**

The image that we have tried to depict in these pages [viz. the first nine chapters] would remain incomplete without the mention of a consistent presence of religious radicalism of an Anabaptist nature, especially in the northeastern regions of the peninsula. The roots of the movement should apparently be identified in the Tyrolean and Trentino offshoot of the great revolt of 1525, and amongst the followers of Michael Gaismayr who sought refuge in great numbers in the Venetian territory. Gaismayr, who himself established residence at Padua and was on the payroll of the Serenissima, was known to have people preach and read "things authored by Luther in his own home." He also kept close contact with the church in Zurich and with Zwingli, up until Zwingli's death in Kappel in October of 1531 (a few months before Gaismayr was himself eliminated by a Habsburg hit man), with the hope of mobilizing an anti-imperial protestant faction which would also include Venice. Jakob Huter, the founder of the Anabaptist Moravian colonies, was Tyrolean. He was burned alive in Innsbruck in 1536, but was very successful in proselytizing on either side of the Alps. The mobility of artisans, sellers, and students along the Brennero way facilitated a constant influx and an exchange path for the small clandestine communities that were created in many cities of the mainland (and in a few rare cases, even in the countryside), whose Christian witnessing effort was able to exhaust every subversive instance in an austere separatist choice. The role played by the mysterious Tiziano was without a doubt decisive. Having gotten close to the radicalism of the Italian exiles in Graubünden during his stay in Switzerland, following his adhesion to the reformed faith, he then returned homeland and promoted active proselytism ("He always goes persuading and teaching this doctrine") and was given the reputation to be the first to bring Anabaptism from Germany.

A vivid (even if not always accurate) overall picture of the movement is seen in the detailed interrogations of Pietro Manelfi. This priest from the Marches, of whom we have already spoken about when we narrated the path to his conversion to the Lutheran heresy, was re-baptized by Tiziano at Ferrara and became the influential "minister" appointed to visit the various

Anabaptist “churches.” In the autumn of 1551 he would then voluntarily present himself in front of the inquisition in Bologna to spill the beans and denounce his brothers in the faith. In his declaration, Manelfi listed one by one the numerous “Lutherans, Anabaptists, and other heretics” whom he had known and visited during his numerous travels, not only in the Venetian dominion, but also at Ferrara and in Romagna, at Bologna and Florence, at Modena and Pisa, at Piacenza and Cremona. Out of his declaration emerges a thick and various world spreading from Padua to Istria, from Verona to Rovigo, from the Cittadella to Friuli, comprised of tailors, hat makers, perfumers, shoemakers, innkeepers, weavers, apothecaries, rag merchants, tooth-drawers, barbers, dyers, furriers, blacksmiths, metal workers, peddlers (among whom were a “handicapped without feet” and a “hunchbacked who sold bread in the square” at Vicenza), often with all their families. In addition there were painters and sword smiths who were often forced to leave their professions (“the Anabaptists do not want any who make weapons or paintings”). There were also doctors, notaries, rectors and canonries of the Pola cathedral, ex-priests and friars married with children (whom had become artisans), teachers, farmers, a student, a doctor in law and even a commendatory abbot from Naples such as Girolamo Busale. He was rich of “great benefices” and because of them was accused of nourishing himself “of the blood of the beast, that is the pope,” and therefore was forced to transfer them to his father “so that he could be accepted among Anabaptists, because they did not want anybody among themselves who had any benefits and preeminence, unless he renounce them.” These were often forced to go through bitter human and religious experiences, like in the case of the schoolteacher from Padua, Alvise de Colti, just to mention one example. He was re-baptized toward the middle of the 1550s and then “separated and driven away by the Anabaptists because he taught youth to make the sign of the cross.” He was put on trial due to the accusation of the priest from the Marches and regained his freedom in 1554. He moved soon after to Vicenza (where he took up his profession again and became a factor for count Odoardo da Thiene); he then moved to the Friuli region (where he was a livestock merchant); and finally he moved to Mantua, where, based on new accusations, he was arrested again in 1568, while in his seventies, and burned at the stake two years later for being an unrepentant heretic.

The denouncing done by Manelfi offered the Roman and Venetian authorities the decisive instrument to strongly suppress those dangerous conventicles: true “conspiracies of rascals against the state of paradise and of the world.” At the time in Milan it was written that “These cursed heretics, in addition to other things, remove the authority of every lordship and preach a Christian freedom saying that we are not to be subject to anyone, directly against and to the destruction of every state.” Worrisome revolutionary specters seemed to be taking flesh on the background of the very serious heresies revealed during the interrogations of the priest from the Marches. Here is how he epitomized the faith to which he had adhered when he was

converted, beyond the illicitness and invalidity of infant baptism: “Magistrates cannot be Christians. The sacraments do not confer any grace, but are only external symbols. Do not hold in the church anything except sacred scripture. Do not hold any of the opinions of the doctors. Hold to the fact that the Roman church is diabolical and antichristian.” But, as Manelfi himself also reported, similar “ancient opinions as the Anabaptists’,” based on a rigorous refusal of social hierarchy, had known a rapid development towards anti-Trinitarianism. This happened in parallel with the radicalization of the stands of some of the Italian exiles in Graubünden, among whom of importance was Camillo Renato. His writing, *Adversus baptismum* of 1548, suggested to the guardians of reformed orthodoxy, the first troubled and hostile comments on those “clever [...] Italians prone to controversy and difficult to placate” and, in 1553, on those “men who are always eager for rarer and newer things, of which I am ignorant,” always ready to introduce doubt and start discussions.

In those years, the anti-Trinitarian writings of Michele Servetus were circulated even on this side of the Alps, and already during clandestine meetings held in Vicenza in 1546 (in which Lelio Sozzini supposedly took part) there would have emerged strong discords on the question of “if Christ was God or man.” This was done under the impetus of the radical scriptural exegesis of Girolamo Busale, who, having then returned from Naples after his adherence to Anabaptism, was determined to oppose the traditional doctrines defended by Tiziano. It was precisely to resolve such a delicate problem, further debated in the following years (together with the doubts of some “that the gospel was not the writings of the evangelists alone, but that there were other [writers]”), that an actual “council,” prepared by the missions of specific delegates, was summoned to Venice in 1550. As a witness to the thick web of connections in which the Italian movement was inlaid, delegates were sent “as far as Basel to call two per church in every place.” The disconcerting account of the Anabaptist synod, offered by Manelfi, is worth reading even if there are doubts of its full truthfulness:

And there in the year 1550, in the month of September, there met sixty, between Anabaptist ministers and bishops, in Venice, for a council, where, for forty days fasting, praising, and studying the sacred scriptures, they determined the following articles:

1. Christ was not God, but man, conceived by the seed of Joseph and Mary, but filled with all the virtues of God.
2. Mary had other sons and daughters after Christ, proven by the fact that in several scripture passages Christ had brothers and sisters.
3. No angelic beings were created by God, and where scripture speaks of angels, it speaks of ministers, that is of humans sent by God so as established by scripture.
4. There is no other devil than the wisdom of man, and

therefore that serpent of which Moses speaks of having seduced Eve, is nothing other than human wisdom, because we do not find in scripture anything created by God which is an enemy of God, if not the wisdom of man, as states Paul to the Romans.

5. The impure will not resurrect in the day of judgment, but only the elect, of which Christ was chief.

6. There is no other hell than the grave.

7. When the elect die, they are asleep in the Lord, and their souls do not benefit anything until the day of judgment, when they will be resurrected; the souls of the impure perish with their body, as do the souls of all other animals.

8. The human seed has, from God, the power to produce flesh and spirit.

9. The elect are justified by the eternal mercy and kindness of God, without any visible work, we mean without the death, the blood and merit of Christ.

10. Christ died as a demonstration of the justice of God, and by justice we mean the cumulus of all the goodness and mercy of God and of all his promises.

Far from limiting themselves to a mere refutation of the Trinitarian dogma, these definitions (confirmed a few months later in a new meeting held in Ferrara) implied the negation of the divinity of Christ, reduced to pure man “conceived by the seed of Joseph,” and therefore the negation of the validity of the vicarious expiation and of the saving worth of the sacrifice on the cross. This resulted in the abandon of the fundamental presupposition of the Lutheran and Calvinistic doctrine of justification by faith. It was substituted by the unfathomable ordinances of the divine mercy, altogether deprived of any iniquitous and terrifying value by the claim of the inexistence of hell and of the doctrine of the sleep of the soul after death, such that only the elect are destined to resurrect on the day of the final judgment. Such theological radicalism finds no parallel, anytime during this century, in the varied world of European Anabaptism. It therefore allows us to catch a glimpse of further specific elements of the manner in which the reform was lived and interpreted on this side of the Alps. It is the obvious preamble of the subsequent anti-Trinitarian developments associated with the Italian heretical emigration, destined to mature into the Socinian tradition of the sixteen hundreds, until the crisis of the European conscience and the Illuministic era. The cultural matrices of such extreme doctrinal outcomes are still evasive. Yet, observing the presence at the head of the movement of figures originating from environments of high culture, as were Celio Secondo Curione, Francesco Negri, Girolamo Busale, and Lelio Sozzini, rightly underscores the additions to the many irreducible contributions originating from Anabaptism from beyond the Alps: from the humanistic culture to the Paduan Aristotelian rationalism, from the Erasmian biblical philology to

the persistent prophetic tensions, from radical spiritualism to the movement following Juan de Valdez, among whose followers in the Spanish Naples of the 1540s emerge significant connections with the Hebraic culture of the Sephardi Diaspora and with the Judaizing heredity of the *conversa* tradition.

For example, Girolamo Busale, who was probably of Marrano origins, a native of Calabria having lived in Padua and Naples, was always engaged in heterodox propagandizing and, together with his brothers Bruno and Matteo, and his cousin Guglielmo Basalù, they were plugged into a group connected in a variety of different ways to a Valdesian legacy—among whom were Isabella Briseigna, Marcantonio Villamarina, Lorenzo Tizzano *alias* Benedetto Florio, Francesco Renato, Juan de Villafranca—which assembled itself at times in his house in Naples to celebrate the rite of the holy supper “the German way.” It was toward the end of the 1540s, still in Padua (always at the center of the Italian religious dissent in its different forms), that he submitted himself to the rebaptism ceremony and, being a principal actor in the doctrinal radicalization process in an anti-Trinitarian sense of the venetian community, he became for a brief time an influential “minister,” having the fame of being “very versed in the Hebrew and Greek languages” and of being “a great man,” with “a lively character”: “He worried all with whom he associated with and [...] debated his opinions, and persuaded himself that all bought into his reasoning.” Just in 1550, among other things, the year of the Anabaptist council in which he himself supposedly had participated, Curione published in Basel the *Cento e dieci divine considerationi* [*Hundred and Ten Divine Considerations*] of Valdes, attested to have circulated in manuscript form among venetian Anabaptists.

Having transferred himself to Naples to escape growing suspicions and “to teach and preach there this Anabaptist doctrine” sanctioned by the Venetian synod, it did not take long before Busale started to assume the attitude of an inspired prophet. By now, he was convinced that the Holy Spirit spoke “through his mouth” and was determined to preach his doctrines “publically,” emphasizing the Judaizing elements. This is evidenced by the fact that it did not take long for Anabaptists from Padua to be informed that “in Naples there is a new heretical sect which comprises large numbers of people and even important people in the city, who, among other heresies, hold to the belief that Christ is not God, but a great prophet, and that he did not come as messiah, but as a prophet and truly died and has not yet resurrected, but still has to resurrect and return as messiah [...]. They deny all the New Testament and claim that it is a Greek and gentile invention, and that Paul did not understand anything of the Old Testament, especially concerning justification and the resurrection.” Significant is the fact that while Busale was trying to leave Italy to escape being arrested, he did not head toward the Alpine passes and the protestant churches, but toward Alexandria in Egypt (where he had some family connections) and then to Damascus, where he died several years later. He was remembered by Biandrata as one of the founders of the anti-Trinitarian movement of the 1550s, “a man of theological integrity

and ability second to none.”

The experience of Giovanni Laureto of Naples, was no less complex and restless. An Olivetan monk who left his order and was converted to the reform tradition, Laureto was later re-baptized by Busale (“I discovered him when he was doubting the divinity of Christ,” he would say, “and reasoning together about this, we started reading and re-reading the Scriptures to clarify this point”). Sometime later he again visited Busale while at Padua and then accompanied him to Naples, all the while ready to return to the venetian university city to resume immediately his incessant wanderings, led by a sort of anxious desire to recover the authentic contents of original Christianity. Having finally landed in Salonicco (where a small Anabaptist diaspora community of “maybe twenty” people had established itself), he supposedly continued to deepen his biblical studies with “Jews and rabbis,” until the time when he decided to convert to Judaism. This was the extreme consequence of his denial of the divinity of Christ and the last step before his definite return to the ancient faith and the catholic fold.

The uninterrupted series of arrests, confessions, trials, abjurations, convictions, and escapes, stemmed by the denunciations of Manelfi (and destined to drag on for more than a decade), in the dominion of the San Marco republic—but also in Ferrara, Florence, Naples—signaled the arrival of an unrelenting disintegration of venetian Anabaptism and of its multiple Italian ramifications, whose followers and extreme offshoots will ultimately find asylum in the Moravian Hutterite colonies. Here they returned to the rigorous separatist positions and the original stances of social egalitarianism, abandoning the anti-Trinitarian doctrines altogether. Doctrines, which in a few years, even in Poland, would eventually demonstrate themselves to be fundamentally incompatible with the Anabaptist heritage, as demonstrated by the ultimate failure, in 1567, of the attempted fusion of a Moravian community with the *Ecclesia minor fratrum Polonorum*. Worthy of reading are the words pronounced by the Anabaptist Giuglio Gherlandi in October of 1561, a year before his capital sentence was executed in a venetian prison. Gherlandi was one of the main architects, together with his brethren Francesco Della Sega and Antonio Rizzetto (they also were executed within a few years), of the courageous work of messianic proselytism in Northwestern Italy promoted at the time by the Moravian communities. He stated that: “I have tried to find a people who were freed, by the gospel of truth, from servitude to sin and who would walk in new life and heavenly regeneration by the resurrection of Jesus Christ and who were empowered by God, through the holy spirit to resist sin [...], this people are his holy Church, immaculate, separate from sinners, without a wrinkle or spot or any such thing; that, which like at the time of the apostles Peter and Paul was in Jerusalem, now is in the country of Moravia.” A few years later Gian Giorgio Patrizi da Cherso, another Italian exile, would echo his sentiments:

They live with charity and what each one earns is put in com-



mon and they live in community; older men who do not lie to each other serve as distributors to all what they have need of; they do not carry weapons except for a small knife to cut bread; they preach twice a day and the one who sins is separated from the group and fed separately; and if they knew that one of their own profession was at the end of the world, they would send him money to bring him to themselves [...]. There is no gaming, no blaspheming, no homicide or any other vice and [...] all live from their work in a community of forty or fifty, depending on the locality, and [...] in none of those localities do they want to see priests or friars, and when they come they scream to them: “Wolf, Wolf!”

Almost all the inhabitants of Cinto transferred themselves to Pausram in Moravia, by means of a sort of selective emigration by echelon. Cinto, a small rural village between Pordenone and Portogruaro that practically converted en bloc to Anabaptism due to the propagandizing of Francesco Della Sega, was an extraordinary heterodox community of illiterate peasants, ready to manifest its dissent even by contesting ecclesiastical ceremonies in explicit and defiant ways, and able to resist and last up until the end of the 1580s, even though it was being weakened by the Moravian exodus. They told each other that in those faraway lands “are certain Churches [...] that govern themselves with great charity and great love, and in those places all are allowed to live according to Christ and to hold to whatever opinion one has and likes without fear, and the ones who are in some need are always helped by their brothers.” This resulted in many experiencing scorching disappointments. Some would eventually come back on their steps, as happened to the venetian artisan Marcantonio Varotta, who ended up deciding to return to the ancient church after a feverish series of trips and experiences throughout all of reformed Europe:

I left Moravia—he would tell to the inquisitor in Udine in January of 1567—because while I was there, for about two months, I saw many faiths and many sects, one against the other, one condemning the other, all producing catechisms, where all wanted to be ministers, and some pulled this way and some pulled that way, and all wanted to be the true church. In a single small place called Austerlitz, there were thirteen or fourteen varieties of faiths and sects. I was so scandalized by so many varieties of faiths and sects, that I started to consider the fact that these heresies could be false and that the faith of the Roman church was the true one.

Here, in the same house where Varotta found hospitality, the house of venetian aristocrat Niccolò Paruta (one of the most influential protagonists of the developments of Servetian criticism in a Socinian direction),

Bernardino Ochino would spend the last days of his life in 1564. Ochino had been chased even from Poland because of the anti-Trinitarian doctrines to which he had at last adhered to at the end of his restless itinerary in the whole reformed world: from Geneva to Augusta, from Strasburg to London, from Zurich to Basel. Some of the more learned representatives of the fervent venetian Anabaptist world, after all, converged in the ranks of the Polish and Transylvanian anti-Trinitarian movements. One such personality was the doctor from Padua, Niccolò Buccella, who folded and recanted after his first trial in 1562-64. He then transferred himself in 1574 to the court of Stephano Báthory in Transylvania and subsequently to Poland, where he would tighten the fraternal friendship relations with Fausto Sozzini and would eventually die in 1599. By now, Buccella had been a stranger to any religious confession and was convinced—as would relate the papal nuncio—“that each one, interpreting the new and old testament in whatever sense one thinks is consonant, has to live according to what his conscience, illuminated by this light, dictates to him.” The aspiration of Gian Giorgio Patrizi was not any different. He, eventually having removed any Nicodemian mask, had left his country in 1558, to “go to a place where I can believe whatever I will want,” as he stated at the time. Similar was the aspiration of a humble Anabaptist arrested the day after Manelfi’s denunciation, who naively readily confessed that he had been “held” while he was getting ready to follow the many comrades in faith who had escaped “to Turkey and Germany from here and there” to evade the repression: “In a few days I was also going to go where the others went, not to become a Turk, but to live in freedom with my faith.”

Moreover, Anabaptism and anti-Trinitarianism made up the more radical and secret nucleus of an esoteric doctrine that was professed in the sphere of another heterodox group with many ramifications in central northern Italy, between Ferrara and Mantua, Riva di Trento and Brescia, Bologna and Venice, Milan and Siena, known to the inquisitors as the “Georgian sect” from the name of the Benedictine Sicilian Giorgio Siculo. An extraordinary, and in many ways still mysterious, character, Giorgio Rioli—this was Siculo’s real name—was strangled in prison at Ferrara in the spring of 1551 as an “impious heretic” and a “scoundrel,” soon after the publication of two books, the *Epistola alli cittadini di Riva di Trento* [*Epistle to the Citizens of Riva di Trento*] and the *Espositione nel nono, decimo et undecimo capo della epistola di san Paolo alli Romani* [*Exposition on the Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh Chapters of the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans*], both published in Bologna the year before, with the due approval of the inquisitors. These books nonetheless became the target, a few years later, of bitter confutations from both the Catholics and the Protestants, among whom was Calvin himself, who did not miss the opportunity to express concern for the notable success that the “revelations” of this character had been met with in Italy. A man gifted with an uncommon charisma, even though he had a lack of culture to the point of requiring a sort of translation of his writings from the Sicilian dialect, Siculo

was convinced, the day after his recantation that he pronounced at the conclusion of his trial, that he had denied the truth, and therefore was terrified by the certainty of his eternal damnation for he was predestined to commit the supreme sin that cannot be forgiven. This conviction was based on an event which we mentioned already, the case of Francesco Spiera, the heretic of Cittadella who died in despair in 1548, and it was a paroxysmal case of crisis of religion and of haunted psychological collapse, which nevertheless had a vast European echo to the extent to which it lent itself to different assessments. This can be seen, for example, from *Francisci Spierae [...] Historia*, published in Basel in 1550 by Celio Secondo Curione, who did not miss the opportunity to polemize against many Italians who “play with God,” but at the same time - with a barely veiled polemic against Calvin and his *De Vitandis Superstitionibus* of the previous year - also did not miss the opportunity to highlight the fact that “Satan is not only in Italy, the Antichrist is not only in Italy, all wicked men are not only in Italy, all irreverence and mischief is authored by the papacy.”

This tragic event, which had several distinguished eye witnesses (among whom were Fonzio, Gribaldi, and Vergerio, who according to his own words drew from it the final stimulus to go into exile) because it dragged out for weeks, allowed in fact the substantiation of the anti-Nicodemian polemic of reformed theologians. Furthermore, having revealed the extreme consequences of the predestinarian theology (so as to negate any divine mercy), it allowed the denunciation of “the false doctrine of the protestants”—as a matter of fact, this is what Siculo wanted to do with the title of his opus—inasmuch as it was responsible for the “lie,” or rather the “great blasphemy of his disciple Francesco Spiera against God and the holy doctrine of his holy gospel.” These claims that seemed to be directed toward a controversial defense of the orthodoxy of Catholicism, but which instead masked an inspired announcement (“a divine work and not a human one [...] all full of heavenly science”) of a doctrine of universal salvation in pursuance of grace and the evangelical message, rich in disturbing spiritualistic and Nicodemian implications. “They do not deny Christ, as Francesco Spiera and his lying teachers have mendaciously said, those who, on account of weaker brothers, and also because it is not lawful for them to provide and determine otherwise, consented, with the other infirm brothers, to those cults which did not appear to be licit or true to them. Neither do they deny Christ, those who accept and confess publically the things and the orders that belong to the holy Roman Church in as much as they will otherwise be provided and determined to be legitimate by its teachers,” would write, for example, Siculo, referring to the “infinite number of those who belong to the protestant doctrine, maxims of those who are in Italy, France, and other locations and kingdoms which rule and govern themselves under the order and rite of the Roman Church.”

But even more radical was the message that Siculo had entrusted to his unpublished writings that, like the so-called *Libro maggiore o Libro grandei* [*Major Book*] (successively published in print with the title *Libro della verità*

*christiana et dottrina apostolica* [*The Book of Christian Truth and of Apostolic Doctrine*], but which got lost notwithstanding the tenacious hunting of the inquisitors), were destined to a cautious clandestine circulation and to readings wisely articulated according to the maturity of the individual followers. Based on the little indirect information related to that “great plague” of a writing, it would seem that in it were gradually clarified, not only the anti-Catholic elements of the Georgian doctrine (denial of the papal authority and of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, of purgatory, of the cult of the Virgin and of the saints, of the meritorious worth of works, of the mass, of indulgences, of the real presence during the Eucharist, and so on and so forth of “all the sacraments”), but also the final radical and anti-Trinitarian conclusions to which it came to (“it said that our soul was not created by God, but by men together with the body, it said that there was no hell nor purgatory, but our soul would go flying in the air until the day of judgment [...], it denied the Trinity”) and the prophetic revelations that would have announced its imminent triumph. “He promised many things that will make all the world run after him, if he will deliver them; but if he does not, he will seem a beast and will remain alone,” so wrote one of his disciples to the duke of Este in November 1550. A little time later another one would speak of the wait for a new council, capable of purifying the Church from all “wrinkles and stains,” and even of the coming of the “spirit of God on earth” that the “doctrine and vision of Giorgio” had promised. All this contributes to explaining the obstinacy with which, for twenty plus years, the Holy Office tried to get their hands on the followers and the imitators of the Sicilian visionary, who themselves became more discouraged and disappointed as the years passed by and time took care to deny Siculo’s miraculous prophesies. Siculo’s followers found their numbers especially among pious monks of the congregation in Cassino, not without the implied permission of its president Andrea da Asolo. Even if with differing awareness of the subversive implications of those doctrines, they also found their numbers among diligent reforming bishops who would display appreciation for the works of the Sicilian heretic, using them at times as a source of inspiration for their homilies and their pastoral commitments.

What deserves to be highlighted is the fact that around 1550, among the closest disciples of the maestro were also numbered well-to-do merchants, doctors, humanist scholars, university professors, students and especially many Benedictine monks, among whom was the abbot Luciano Degli Ottoni, one of the official theologians of the order of the Trentino Alto Adige assembly, tied to powerful cardinals like Ercole Gonzaga and Cristoforo Madruzzo, and his brother don Benedetto Fontanini of Mantua. Fontanini was the author of the first draft of *Beneficio di Christo* [*The Benefit of Christ*], in the Naples of Juan de Valdés, who had lived beside Siculo in the monastery in Catania at the end of the 1530s. Even in the case of Giorgio Siculo, and of the extreme theological and prophetic radicalism of the “sect” inspired by him and its astonishing offshoots, unexpected connections

seem to connect—by means of complex and at times undecipherable esoteric and Nicodemian mediations—influential prelates and men of culture with prophetic excitement and popular petitions. In the spirit of those unprecedented doctrinal contaminations, Giuglio da Milano was led to denounce, in the *Esortazione al martirio* [*The Exhortation to Martyrdom*], the “satanic” Sicilian Benedictine monk and those who, like him, had “mixed popery with Anabaptism and [...] had started to create a third sect.” A definition that is not deprived of some analogies with what had just recently been written by Francesco Negri, stigmatizing the turbid “mix of Christian things with papal ones” of which the “spiritual ones” had made themselves responsible, according to him, only so that they could continue to stay comfortably seated “on two saddles.”

It is also very probable that non-random nor regular relations interconnected the principal representatives of the manifold world of Anabaptists, anti-Trinitarians, and disciples of “don Georgio.” They seemed to have scheduled an appointment in Ferrara in 1550-51, on the eve of the arrest and the execution of Siculo, who here could count on the support of a figure like Camillo Orsini, who was very close to Pole and Flaminio. Orsini was moreover well disposed to offer his protection to another radical Anabaptist such as Pierto Bresciani, who, for the occasion, had returned to Italy from his exile in the Grisons. Also very significant from this perspective is the fact that after having sought to intervene in the conciliar debates by sending, toward the end of 1546, his *De iustificazione* to Ottoni (to whom should be attributed the translation into Latin of this, as well as other writings of his teacher), Siculo soon after personally appeared in Trento with the intention to communicate his doctrines to the English cardinal, and to announce to him his prophetic revelations. This is what he supposedly was ordered to do by Christ himself, during one of the frequent apparitions “in person” in which Christ would illuminate Siculo’s soul with the “true intelligence of the sacred Scriptures.”

The peculiar Italian origins of these complex radical leanings, connected with the Anabaptist dissent in different ways, but eventually little by little diverging from it, found precise acknowledgment in the extreme doctrinal choices arrived at by many of the ones who found refuge in Switzerland. This was the case in the Grisons of Camillo Renato (who in the early forties, in Bologna, had already asserted the doctrine of the sleeping of the soul after death), Girolamo da Milano and Pietro Bresciani from Lombardy, of Francesco Renato from Calabria, of the mysterious Tiziano, and also of Giovan Francesco da Bagnacavallo, of Niccolò Camogli, of Girolamo Turriani, of Battista Bovio, of Filippo Valentini, and of numerous heterodox from Modena, including the Sozzini brothers and many others. This was also the case in the Basel of Sebastiano Castellione, of Pietro Perna, of Giovanni Bernardino Bonifacio the marquis of Oria, of Celio Secondo Curione, of Silvestro Tegli, and also of Mino Celsi, of Agostino Doni, of Fausto Sozzini, of Francesco Pucci. Basel was the unmitigated center of anti-Calvinistic op-

position and of the battle against the new orthodox dogmatism (the *Satanae Stratagemata* denounced by Giacomo Aconcio in 1565) and the authoritative decline of the reformed churches. A decline whose most evident and clamorous sign was the sentence of Michele Servetus in 1553 to die at the stake, which induced Matteo Gribaldi (civil law professor in Padua) to write his *Apologia*, and Rebato to write his indignant verses in *Carmen*. This was also the case, in the Geneva, of the anti-Trinitarian clique that had gathered around Giorgio Biandrata, Valentino Gentile, Gian Paolo Alciati, protagonists of a hard clash against Calvin, until the definitive break in 1558 and of their exile to eastern European countries. It is not the job of these pages to follow the complex events of the “religiously caused” Italian emigration to Switzerland and then to Moravia, Poland, and Transylvania. Events that for all intents and purposes, whether they resulted in orthodoxy or heresy—of first importance is the development of the Socinian anti-Trinitarianism and its indispensable connection with the ever maturing theorization of the freedom of conscience and of religious rationalism—appertain of the history of European Protestantism and had ever so marginal and faint echoes in Catholic Italy.

Even these radical unrests, while they were destined to follow autonomous paths in the dust of confessions, sects, disputes, and controversies stemming from the reformation, underscore yet again the complex cultural heredity, the political and social peculiarities, the restless experimentalism, and the extraordinary creativity that marked the religious crisis of the fifteen hundreds on this side of the Alps. The progressive weariness of those impassioned hopes of being able to contribute to a profound mutation of the theological contents and of the institutional structures of the Christian faith has to be seen against the background of both the progressive stiffening of the protestant churches, in the context of their doctrinal and normative profiles that by this time were set in place, and the consolidation of the renewed Trent certitudes and the repressive system that was put in place to protect them, and if necessary, impose them. In a period of a few years, as a matter of fact, there would be no delay in the inauguration of a long anti-reformation season by the commitment of the episcopate to pastoral reforms and the disciplining of religious life; the seminaries and the new forms of clergy recruitment; the synods and the pastoral visits; the zeal in benevolence, support, and education of new religious orders; the mission of the Capuchin and Jesuits in the countryside to promote the Christianization of “our Indies” (with long lasting consequences for the Italian rural world); the overall clericalization of society; and the constriction of every aspect of free theological research and discussion between devotional conformism and ecclesiastical authoritarianism.