



# ROMAN CENSORSHIP OF SCIENCE AND NATURAL PHILOSOPHY: 16<sup>TH</sup>-17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

LEEN SPRUIT

## SUMMARY

The opening of the historical archives of the Roman congregations of the Inquisition and the Index in 1998 have produced a host of new insights relevant not only for a more detailed understanding of ecclesiastical censorship as a phenomenon of the *longue durée*, but also for the intellectual history of the modern era in general. This essay presents a summary view of the main results of the investigations in censorship of science and natural philosophy for the early modern period.

UNTIL recently, historical research on the censorial interventions regarding science and natural philosophy by Roman ecclesiastical bodies of doctrinal control focused for the most part on individual cases. Accordingly, most studies concentrated on the 'victims' of ecclesiastical censorship, rather than on the institutional aspects of the latter. Hence, due also to the enduring closure of the Roman Archives of the Inquisition and the Index, individual cases were seen as fully representative for the standard functioning of these bodies of doctrinal control. The publication of a large amount of documents from those archives in the years after the opening in 1998 have produced a host of new insights relevant not only for a more detailed understanding of ecclesiastical censorship of science and philosophy as a phenomenon of the *longue durée*, but also for the intellectual history of the modern era in general.<sup>1</sup>

In the past, investigation into the Catholic Church's attitude towards science and philosophy has frequently been characterized by several forms of bias. Since the Enlightenment, when the issue of the historical role of Inquisition and of ecclesiastical censorship was raised, Catholic authors, such as Valsecchi and Zaccaria,<sup>2</sup> were heavily conditioned by apologetic aims,

leen.spruit@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> See: F. BERRETTA, *Orthodoxie philosophique et Inquisition romaine aux 16<sup>e</sup>-17<sup>e</sup> siècles*, in «*Historia philosophica*», III, 2005, pp. 67-96; U. BALDINI, L. SPRUIT (eds.), *Catholic Church and Modern Science. Documents from the Roman Archives of the Holy Office and the Index*, vol. 1: *The Sixteenth Century*, 4 tomes, Roma, 2009; S. RICCI, *Inquisitori, censori, filosofi sullo scenario della Controriforma*, Roma, 2008; IDEM, *Davanti al Sant'Uffizio. Filosofi sotto processo*, Viterbo, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> A. VALSECCHI, *Dei fondamenti della religione e dei fonti dell'empietà*, 3 vols., Padova 1765 and



while most 'lay' historians described the relation between science and faith in terms of the Church's hampering of scientific progress, in particular in Italy and the Iberian peninsula. Both approaches assumed, and accordingly developed, an essentially monolithic picture of the functioning of the Congregations. In particular, nineteenth and twentieth-century historical studies analyzed the Roman Congregations as characterized by fixed criteria, ignorant collaborators, hostility towards science and free thought, and in general by a fundamental misunderstanding of cultural innovation.

However, recent research has established that as a rule the inquisitors and censors were neither totalitarian rulers nor diehard fanatics: they improvised with many attempts and mistakes. Their daily practice was a quite particular combination of repression and misconceptions. Paradoxically, cardinals and censors pretended to protect Italy from the nefarious aspects of contemporary European culture, and contemporarily they attempted to rule it, assessing the doctrinal and pedagogical implications of views and printed works.

The inquisitorial records should be studied for what they can tell us about the very apparatus of power which led to their creation in the first place – and how this power related to the broader society. Reflections on the complex history of inquisitions in the Italian context have now reached a stage of maturity that allows for transition from source editing and micro-historical core-sampling to revision and synthesis. To this plea for more historical research another can be added: that analyses are needed of the ways in which the formation of orthodoxy and of heresy were dependent on the institutional processes of judging, teaching, and administering Christian subjects. As far as science and natural philosophy are concerned, the recent opening of their archives permits a more balanced account of the inner functioning of the Roman bodies of doctrinal control, in particular as to the range of sensible and controversial issues, and the articulation and effects of ecclesiastical censorship.

#### 1. ROME AND PERIPHERY: THE CORRESPONDENCE

The main criteria guiding the censors in their assessments were the Bible, conciliar decrees, the tradition of the Church, and the views of authoritative Fathers and schoolmen. In setting up the cases and, to a lesser extent, the *censores*, the most important instruments were inquisitorial manuals, and the past decrees of the Inquisition and the Index. Also the correspondence between the Roman Holy Office and the peripheral seats is worth being

*La verità della Chiesa cattolica romana dimostrata illustrata e difesa*, Padova, 1787; F. A. ZACCARIA, *Storia polemica delle proibizioni de' libri*, Roma, 1777.

mentioned. The control system set up by the Holy Office and then used also by the Congregation of the Index was based on a well-structured system of exchange of information. The letters were the basis of communication between center and periphery. It is no coincidence that most of the archival funds of the Inquisition scattered across Italy consist in two main series, one relative to the processes and the other containing the correspondence with the Roman congregation. The system of epistolary correspondence between the Roman court and the local inquisitors took shape in the first decades after the founding of the Inquisition in 1542. Subsequently, a significant interdependence developed between manuals, decrees and correspondence, as the latter directed the local inquisitors in applying and adapting general legal theories and views to the specific cases. The tension between mobile praxis and stubborn theory, between fluid adaptation and reformulation, on the one hand, and rigidly, dogmatically static written norms on the other, is a constant theme in the correspondence between the Congregation at the center and officials in the field.<sup>1</sup>

The Archive of the Congregation preserves two hundred and twenty volumes of correspondence that clearly demonstrate the increasing power of the Roman tribunal in the early modern period, and by consequence the legal and juridical subordination of the periphery to the summit decisions. It was through the preserved correspondence that the new inquisitor could have found not only an extensive repertoire of cases that had characterized the activities of his predecessors, but also the decisions that from time to time had been taken upon several occasions by the cardinals of the Roman court.

## 2. FRICTIONS

Till recently, it was a common place that the Roman Congregations were among the principal causes of the downturn of modern science and innovative philosophical culture in Italy in the period from the end of the sixteenth till the end of the nineteenth century. The trials against Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei have been labelled time and again as highly emblematic for this process of intellectual decay, at least as from the period of the so-called Risorgimento, which eventually led to the unitary state in 1860-70. In both trials, Copernican astronomy and the new world view were usually seen as the most typical clash between the Catholic Church, on the one hand, and modern science and philosophy, on the other. However, in the period from the rise of the Congregations to the end of the eighteenth century the points of friction were numerous, and they were surely not limited to cosmology only.

<sup>1</sup> See P. SCARAMELLA, *Le lettere della Congregazione del Sant'Ufficio ai tribunali di fede di Napoli 1563-1625*, Trieste-Napoli, 2002, Introduction.

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, ecclesiastical examination and censure of science underwent some remarkable changes. A few examples may clarify this issue. First, many authors of works which can be viewed as 'scientific' in a modern sense were not prohibited (or prosecuted) for specific scientific or philosophical views, but rather because of their religious creed or else for their involvement in disciplines now regarded as pseudo-scientific, such as astrology and magic. Second, as a rule ecclesiastical censure did not ban technical scientific works, but rather popularizations and philosophical extrapolations. Newton's *Principia* were not placed on the Index, while expositions of his ideas, such as Voltaire's *Elements* and Algarotti's *Il Newtonianismo per le dame*, were promptly forbidden. Third, the criteria for condemnations were not everlasting. By the middle of the eighteenth century exponents of the Roman Curia started to realize that traditional geocentrism had become groundless. The influential consultor Pietro Lazzeri proposed to remove the condemnation of heliocentrism from the Index. His view was adopted by the Index issued under Benedict XIV in 1758 which tacitly removed the general condemnation, but not that of the individual works censured in 1616.<sup>1</sup> Finally, many (scientific and philosophical) works were not condemned *tout court*, but with the *donec corrigatur* or *expurgetur* proviso. This meant that these works could be permitted either in an emendated edition or else that reading permits could be granted for older editions on condition that they were corrected according to expurgatory *censurae* approved by the central bodies of doctrinal control.

Philosophical and scientific views became liable to theological censure when they contradicted or questioned the Holy Scripture, conciliar decrees, papal bulls, and the authority of the Fathers and schoolmen. This meant that some disciplinary fields and doctrinal issues were more 'sensible' than other ones. A provisional list includes: cosmology (Neoplatonic and post Copernican views contradicting the traditional world picture), psychology (materialism; deviations from Aristotelian hylemorphism; the denial of the organic hierarchy of souls or of the substantial nature of the intellect; assumption of universal principles, including the world soul or a unique intellect; metempsychosis),<sup>2</sup> medicine (non-Galenic theories; its link to astrology and, in recipes and cures, to magic),<sup>3</sup> chronology (the extension of the

<sup>1</sup> For discussion, see U. BALDINI, *Saggi sulla cultura della Compagnia di Gesù (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, Padova, 2000, pp. 301-332, and M. A. FINOCCHIARO, *Retrying Galileo, 1633-1992*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2005, pp. 138-153.

<sup>2</sup> See L. SPRUIT, *Catholic censorship of early modern psychology*, in *Authority, Innovation and Early Modern Epistemology. Essays in Honour of Hilary Gatti*, eds. M. McLaughlin, I. D. Rowland, and E. Tarantino, London, 2015, pp. 218-238.

<sup>3</sup> Books on medicine and natural philosophy caused particular trouble to the Congregation for the Index, because many physicians and philosophers demanded licenses for read-

traditional chronology on the basis of scientific and philological arguments), physics (the rejection of the distinction between substance and phenomenal appearance; the denial of secondary qualities and final causality; atomism).

### 3. OUTCOMES OF CENSORSHIP

In the period between 1542 and 1700 the Roman Inquisition started legal proceedings against some thirty-five authors who are significantly related to science and natural philosophy. It should be emphasized that most of these trials were not motivated by charges concerning scientific or philosophical views, or else only obliquely so. In most cases, the defendant was accused of heresy (Protestantism or sympathy for Protestants), of the possession of forbidden works or else of magic, the defence or practice of judiciary astrology and divination. Moreover, some proceedings merely regarded books and started when the author had died in the meantime (Jean Bodin, abbot Johannes Trithemius, Tommaso Cornelio, Spinoza).

Some trials based on charges which now appear completely meaningless, actually were punished with insanely long prison terms. The trial of Girolamo Vecchietti (1556-1640) is a case in point. In 1621 this elderly scholar published a chronological work, entitled *De anno primitivo*. Soon he was accused among other things of having dedicated the book to the king of England and because his interpretations of biblical chronology contrasted the Catholic doctrine. The main charge was for holding that the Last Supper had not taken place in Jerusalem, but in Bethany, and that Christ had not eaten the paschal lamb with the disciples, since according to the chronology adopted in *De anno primitivo*, Jewish Passover was celebrated the following day, Friday 14 Nisan. In 1622 Vecchietti's work was prohibited by the Holy Office and after four years of negotiations he was arrested in February 1626. In prison he became embittered and he would not even be visited by the Cardinals; he was released only in 1633.<sup>1</sup>

However, apart from the (very few) defendants handed over to the secular arm for capital punishment, the majority of the sentences was remarkably mild. Many trials (in particular after 1600) ended up with a mere admonition or with no sentence at all. In the case of trials that ended with an abjuration, only rarely the prisoner was confined; usually he was immediately released or else set free after a fairly short time.

Furthermore, apart from some cases of deep and ravaging psychological

ing books by non-Catholics, including ancient authors as well as contemporary heretical or strongly suspect authors (Cardano, Fuchs, Gessner, Mizauld, Fernel).

<sup>1</sup> See F. BERETTA, *Campanella, Urbain VIII et le procès de Gerolamo Vecchietti. Une définition doctrinale éclipsée*, «Bruniana & Campanelliana», XIX, 2013, pp. 445-462; Th. F. MAYER, *The Roman Inquisition. A Papal Bureaucracy and Its Laws in the Age of Galileo*, Philadelphia, 2013, pp. 210-215.

distress, the mere fact of having been tried by the Holy Office did not affect the future career of most of the defendants. Girolamo Borri, for example, took up his university job after every one of his four trials. Also Aldrovandi's trial, concluded when he was still a young man, did not hamper his academic career. Stigliola resumed his job at the Court of Fortifications in Naples. Cardano was removed from his chair at the University of Bologna, but after his transfer to Rome he was accepted with honour at the local College of physicians, and became the private physician of several cardinals. Within a short time, he obtained permission to resume his job in Bologna, which was impeded only by his imminent death. Illustrative seventeenth-century cases are those of Cesare Cremonini and Francesco Borri.

Cremonini's interpretation of Aristotelian natural philosophy triggered life-long proceedings by the Roman Inquisition. Initially, the investigations focussed on his heterodox interpretation of Aristotle's psychological texts, but in the seventeenth century, they also involved his interpretation of Aristotle's cosmology. Cremonini promised again and again to correct his views, but the cardinals of the Holy Office slowly became aware that in effect the Paduan professor was mocking them. The Congregation attempted over more than twenty years to push Cremonini to a true repent, but he shifted the deadline repeatedly, and the proceedings bogged down time and again. During all these years the local ecclesiastical authorities duly obeyed to the orders from Rome, but as the political authorities did not permit his extradition, there was no concrete sanction or effect for his social status and career.<sup>1</sup>

Due to his fame of adventurer and impostor Francesco Giuseppe Borri (1627-1695) had become a myth already during his lifetime. The Milan trial in 1658-1661 regarded Borri's role in the aftermath of the events involving the sect of the «Pelagini». His trial regarded almost exclusively religious issues, such as the divinity of the Virgin, and the incarnation of the Holy Ghost. Condemned for heresy in 1661 by the Inquisition in Milan by default, he travelled through Europe, visiting Swiss, Germany, France, Holland and Denmark. In 1670, he attempted to reach Istanbul, but he was arrested in Moravia, and then transferred to Rome. The new trial ended with the sentence of 25 September 1672, and, quite remarkably, although Borri was to be considered plainly as a «relapsus», the cardinals excluded *a priori* the possibility to hand him over to the secular arm. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and he died in the prison of Castel Sant'Angelo.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a summary, see L. SPRUIT, *Cremonini nelle carte del Sant'Uffizio romano*, in *Cesare Cremonini. Aspetti del pensiero e scritti*. Atti del Convegno di studio (Padova, 26-27 febbraio 1999), eds. E. Riondato, A. Poppi, 2 vols., Padova, 2000, vol. 1, pp. 193-204.

<sup>2</sup> L. ROSCIONI, *La carriera di un alchimista ed eretico del Seicento: Francesco Giuseppe Borri tra mito e nuovi documenti*, «Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica», 1, 2010, pp. 149-186.

A far more complex picture arises from the ecclesiastical assessment of suspect, heterodox, and heretical authors and their works. First, many books were placed on the Index without leaving a documentary trace, that is, either a decree to commission the examination of the work or else a *censura*. Second, not all works by authors condemned in Holy Office trials or Index proceedings were placed on the Index. Third, some authors were condemned as heretics (the prohibition of ‘opera omnia’ in the first class), and yet after years or decennia individual works were prohibited. Fourth, sometimes authors were placed in the Index and then (tacitly) removed from it. A clamorous case is Ramon Lull’s: the twenty works condemned by Gregory XI’s reputed Bull *Conservationi puritatis* (dated 25 January 1376) were placed on Paul IV’s Index (1559), removed from the Index by the Tridentine fathers in 1564, prohibited again in 1583 by the Congregation for the Index, and subsequently removed in 1596. Fifth, some authors were condemned by an Index decree, but not placed in later printed Indexes. Sixth, some authors, although professed Catholics, were repeatedly condemned in the first class (Thomas White), while other authors were condemned twice because the Congregation was unaware of the fact that their books had been condemned already (Spinoza, in 1679 and 1691).

A major difference between Inquisition and Index was the outcome of the proceedings. As we have seen above, books could be (tacitly) removed from the Index. The trials and investigations of the Holy Office not always led to a final verdict or condemnation, but whenever a verdict was reached, the sentence was definite and could not be revoked. Only in the quite exceptional Galilei affair, the original 1633 verdict was never annulled. In 1758, the general prohibition on heliocentrism was removed from the Index. In the 1820 Settele affair, the Holy Office granted permission to teach heliocentrism as a physical truth. When a panel of scientists, theologians and historians made a preliminary report in 1984, it said that Galileo had been wrongfully condemned. Then, in 1992, John Paul II, commenting on the role of Scripture in physical science, said that the scientist «showed himself to be more perceptive than the theologians who opposed him».<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PROCEEDINGS: A PREVIEW

In 1996 I embarked on Ugo Baldini’s project «Catholic Church and Modern Science», which had the aim to publish the relevant documents regarding science and natural philosophy kept in the historical archives of the Roman Congregations of the Inquisition and the Index, selected over the pe-

<sup>1</sup> FINOCCHIARO, *Retrying Galileo, 1633-1992*, cit., p. 355.

riod from their rise in the sixteenth century till the Napoleonic era. In 2009 the sixteenth-century documentation had been published; a second and a third volume, respectively on seventeenth and eighteenth-century developments, are to be published in the coming years.

Sixteenth-century proceedings regarding natural philosophy and science focused on heterodox interpretations of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy, on early modern versions of naturalism and materialism, and on the intricate implications of magic and astrology. With the rise of modern philosophy and science in the seventeenth century this scenario radically changed. Since 1998, many documents from the historical archives of the Inquisition and the Index on proceedings regarding seventeenth-century philosophers and scientists have been published. Francis Bacon,<sup>1</sup> Thomas Burnet,<sup>2</sup> René Descartes,<sup>3</sup> Leonardo Di Capua,<sup>4</sup> Galileo Galilei,<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hobbes,<sup>6</sup> and Nicolas Malebranche<sup>7</sup> are cases in point. In addition to these authors substantial documentations regarding other authors will be published in our second volume, including Johann Alsted, Thomas Bartholin, Sebastiano Bartoli, Francesco Giuseppe Borri, Robert Boyle, Tommaso Cornelio, Hieronymus Hirnhaim, Daniel Sennert, Isaac Vossius, and Thomas White. Thematic sections will include alchemy (Oswald Croll, Andreas Libavius, *Theatrum chemicum*), astrology (Antonio Cararino, Placido Titi, Immanuel Rosales), atomism (Pietro Francesco Pasolini, the Neapolitan atheism affaire), heliocentrism, magic, medicine, other worlds (John Wilkins and Bernard de Fontenelle), physiognomy (Antonio Pelegrini, Honorat Nicquet), and the weapon salve controversy.

The rise of modern philosophy raised serious issues for several Catholic doctrines. One in particular is worth mentioning here, because it was central to the Catholic assessment and censure of Cartesian and other anti-Aristotelian philosophies. The new mechanical philosophy lacked the dis-

<sup>1</sup> M. FATTORI, «*Vafer Baconus*»: la storia della censura del *De augmentis scientiarum*, «Nouvelles de la République des Lettres», XX, 2000, 2, p. 97-130; EADEM, *Altri documenti inediti dell'Archivio del Sant'Uffizio sulla censura del De augmentis scientiarum di Francis Bacon*, «Nouvelles de la République des Lettres», XXI, 2001, 1, pp. 121-130.

<sup>2</sup> G. COSTA, *Thomas Burnet e la censura pontificia (con documenti inediti)*, Firenze, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> J.-R. ARMOGATHE, V. CARRAUD, *La première condamnation des Oeuvres de Descartes, d'après des documents inédits aux Archives du Sant-Office*, «Nouvelles de la République des Lettres», XXI, 2001, 2, pp. 103-37.

<sup>4</sup> M. FATTORI, *Censura e filosofia moderna: Napoli, Roma e l'affaire Di Capua*, «Nouvelles de la République des Lettres», XXIV, 2004, 1-2, pp. 17-44

<sup>5</sup> U. BALDINI and L. SPRUIT, *Nuovi documenti galileiani degli archivi del Sant'Uffizio e dell'Indice*, «Rivista di storia della filosofia», LVI, 2001, pp. 661-699.

<sup>6</sup> M. FATTORI, *La filosofia moderna e il S. Uffizio: «Hobbes haereticus est, et anglus»*, «Rivista di storia della filosofia», LXII, 2007, pp. 83-108.

<sup>7</sup> G. COSTA, *Malebranche e Roma. Documenti dell'Archivio della Congregazione per la dottrina della fede*, Firenze, 2002.



inction between subject and accident, and thus deprived the traditional doctrine of the Eucharist of its philosophical and scientific explanation. As from the 1620s alternative theories were proposed for the sacrament of the mass, the first significant being the doctrine proposed by the Sicilian priest Giuseppe Ballo. The latter held that after the consecration bread and wine simply stop to be there and that our perception of the external properties of these natural substances is caused by the body of Christ. Despite repeated attempts, the cardinals of the Holy Office refused to grant him permission to print. Subsequently, Emmanuel Maignan argued that when bread and wine are vanished God produces in our senses the corresponding impressions. Maignan's view was endorsed by Pietro Conti, and this triggered the prohibition of his *Summa philosophiae* in 1673. An explicit alternative, formulated from an explicitly atomistic point of view, was proposed by Andrea Pissini who in *Naturalium doctrina* argued that the traditional *species*, referred to in the Bible, the Fathers, and the Council decrees, in no way may be regarded as physical entities, but that they are «apparitio, imago, similitudo panis et vini». Pissini openly attacked Peripatetic philosophy and defended atomism as compatible with Christian faith.

As from 1977 Jean-Robert Armogathe has devoted important studies to the controversy on the Eucharist.<sup>1</sup> Recently, the issue has also been analyzed in studies by Francesco Beretta and Maria Pia Donato.<sup>2</sup> Our second volume will contain an extensive section on the controversy over the Eucharist, including the cases of Giuseppe Ballo, Pietro Conti, Casimir of Toulouse, and Andrea Pissini. The trial against the latter is without doubt the most clamorous case concerning the Eucharist documented in the Archive of the Congregation. After the denial of the *imprimatur* for his *Naturalium doctrina* by the Inquisitor of Venice in 1671 Pissini 'secretly' had his book be printed in Augsburg (1675) and then imported it into Italy. Once informed by the Venetian Inquisition, the Roman Holy Office started a wide-range offensive. His case was frequently discussed in the meetings of the Holy Office from 26 June 1675 till the end of the year 1676. A host of censors and consultors pronounced on his views. Eventually, in December 1676, Pissini was summoned to Rome and forced to recant the central views of *Naturalium doctrina*.

<sup>1</sup> J.-R. ARMOGATHE, *Theologia cartesiana. L'explication physique de l'Eucharistie chez Descartes et dom Desgabets*, La Haye, 1977; IDEM, *Cartesian physics and the Eucharist in the documents of the Holy Office and the Roman Index (1671-1676)*, in *Receptions of Descartes. Cartesianism and Anticartesianism in Early Modern Europe*, London, New York, 2004, pp. 149-170.

<sup>2</sup> F. BERETTA, *Inquisición romana y atomismo desde el caso Galileo hasta comienzos del siglo XVIII: ¿qué ortodoxia?*, in J. MONTESINOS, S. TOLEDO (eds.), *Ciencia y religión en la edad moderna*, La Orotava, 2007, pp. 35-68; M. P. DONATO, *Scienza e teologia nelle congregazioni romane. La questione atomista, 1626-1727*, in A. ROMANO (ed.), *Rome et la science moderne. Entre Renaissance et Lumières*, Rome, 2008, pp. 594-634.

A final consideration regards the licences to read forbidden books. The licences are the main instrument for assessing the difference between the hypothetical and the real efficacy of ecclesiastical censorship. Then, the grant of reading licences illustrates the variations in judgment and underlying criteria of the Congregations over a longer period, the differences between the Roman policy and that of the bishops and peripheral Inquisitors, and the (latent) conflicts within and between the two Congregations. Finally, the licences that were granted reveal the interaction of essentially religious and cultural criteria with the practical requirements of contemporary society which the Church could not completely ignore or suppress. The nearly complete documentation of the seventeenth-century reading permits for several decades (1610s to 1640s) will enable a fairly detailed reconstruction of the doctrinal and sociological implications of this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The extant documentation for the sixteenth century produced one hundred and forty reading permits, while that for the seventeenth century counts about ten times that number.