

Italian antitrinitarianism and the legitimacy of dissent

I. An antitrinitarian approach to dissent?

The place of early modern antitrinitarianism in the history of religious toleration has long been an object of scholarly interest. The view that the radical religious movement which developed among early sympathisers of Michael Servetus from the middle of the sixteenth century, quickly spreading to eastern Europe and gradually evolving into what would eventually be known as Socinianism, played a seminal role in formulating some of the earliest open defences of freedom of religion in Western political thinking has found widespread support among historians of toleration and of radical Protestantism alike. While numerous studies have explored the views on religious freedom advanced by the movement's most notorious thinker, Fausto Sozzini (or Faustus Socinus), and by his seventeenth-century successors,¹ at least as much attention has been devoted to those sixteenth-century Italian dissidents in whose milieu Sozzini first developed his theological vision: Matteo Gribaldi Moffa, Celio Secondo Curione, Bernardino Ochino, Lelio Sozzini, and other members of that loose group of freethinkers whom the Unitarian tradition widely identifies as its first founders.² A particularly important contribution has come from the Italian historiographical tradition, which has accorded a special role to Sozzini's predecessors in the development of European thought ever since Delio Cantimori's classic work *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento* (1939):³ decades of sustained interest have helped cement the notion that a belief in free, open dissent

¹ The Socinians' thought is addressed in Henry Kamen, *The Rise of Toleration* (London, 1967), 123-28; Joseph Lecler, *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme* (Paris, 1994 [first edition 1955]), 384-97; and *passim* in Earl Morse Wilbur's classic study of the Socinian movement, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and Its Antecedents* (Cambridge, Mass, 1947 [first edition 1945]), 384-587, and in Francesco Quatrini's more recent work on Socinianism, *I sociniani. Una chiesa ereticale in lotta con la cristianità (1563-1638)* (Naples, 2023), especially 253-86, as well as in plenty of more focused studies. A particularly rich study is offered by Fiorella Pintacuda de Michelis, *Socinanesimo e tolleranza nell'età del razionalismo* (Florence, 1975). On the widespread emphasis on the theme of toleration in scholarship on Socinianism, see Sarah Mortimer's remarks in her contribution later in this volume.

² Examples for the first group of scholars include Wilbur Kitchener Jordan's classic study of the development of ideas about religious toleration in England, which dedicated a lengthy chapter to Jacopo Aconcio and his Italian associates, 'the founders of Unitarianism' (*The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, 4 vols. (London, 1932-1940), 1: 306; see in general 1: 303-65); Kamen, *Rise of Toleration*, 81-85; Lecler, *Histoire de la tolérance*, 347-61; Gary Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration* (University Park, 1996), 2-3, 104-36; Roland Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty: Nine Biographical Studies* (Hamden, 1971 [first published 1951]), 147-76. Among contributions by historians of Unitarianism and related radical movements, see Wilbur, *History of Unitarianism*, 76-112, 213-57; George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirkville, 1992 [third revised edition; first published 1962]), 819-96, 943-89; some remarks also in Herbert John McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1951), 5-9.

³ Delio Cantimori, *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento e Prospettive di storia ereticale italiana del Cinquecento*, ed. Adriano Prosperi (Turin, 1992).

in matters of religion was among the constitutive elements of the Italian antitrinitarians' thought.⁴

If the fact that ideas about the legitimacy of dissent played a role in defining the identity of the antitrinitarian movement from its very origin is undisputed, the precise nature of the connection between a rejection of the Trinity and belief in religious freedom has been defined only in somewhat vague terms by those who have explored it. Perhaps the fullest statement on the matter is that offered by Earl Morse Wilbur in the introduction to his monumental history of Unitarianism: while he identified criticism of the Trinity as the only central doctrine holding together the Unitarian tradition, Wilbur declared himself primarily concerned

not so much [with] the history of a particular sect or form of Christian *doctrine*, as [with] the development of a movement fundamentally characterized instead by its steadfast and increasing devotion to these three leading *principles*: first, complete mental freedom in religion rather than bondage to creeds or confessions; second, the unrestricted use of reason in religion, rather than reliance upon external authority or past tradition; third, generous tolerance of differing religious views and usages rather than insistence upon uniformity in doctrine, worship or polity. Freedom, reason and tolerance: it is these conditions above all others that this movement has from the beginning increasingly sought to promote; while if emphasis upon certain doctrinal elements has often or for long periods seemed to characterize it or even to dictate its name, it has been largely because insistence upon contrary doctrines seemed to conflict with the enjoyment of the conditions above named. For the movement has throughout its whole course strenuously resisted any attempt at dogmatic fixity, [...] being at all times far more concerned with the underlying spirit of Christianity in its application to the situations of practical life than with intellectual formulations of Christian thought.⁵

Two elements are worth noting in this account: first, while the Trinity is presented as a matter of doctrine, religious tolerance is regarded as a question of principle; second, opposition to trinitarian dogma is subordinated to the movement's resistance to all stances that conflicted with its commitment to 'freedom, reason and tolerance'. A comparable interpretation was

⁴ To cite only a few examples, see the many studies by Antonio Rotondò, now collected in *Studi di storia ereticale del Cinquecento*, 2 vols. (Florence, 2008); Sergio Carletto and Graziano Lingua, eds., *Cristianesimo senza roghi. Materiali sulla Riforma radicale e sulla libertà religiosa* (Dronero, 2003); Mario Biagioni and Lucia Felici, *La Riforma radicale nell'Europa del Cinquecento* (Rome, 2012).

⁵ Wilbur, *History of Unitarianism*, 5, emphasis in original. Cf. also Stanislas Kot, *Socinianism in Poland: The Social and Political Ideas of the Polish Antitrinitarians in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Earl Morse Wilbur (Boston, 1957), xxiii, which lists the same three principles.

offered by Antonio Rotondò when discussing the specific case of the Italian antitrinitarians of the mid-sixteenth century: in his account, the Italians' approach to doctrine, rooted in a commitment to tolerance and in a reduction of most doctrinal matters to the status of *adiaphora* through the use of reason, was what made their critique of the Trinity both distinctive and most threatening in the eyes of their opponents; their notion of tolerance, moreover, was grounded 'in the premise that the practice of Christian life should move from a rigorous adherence to dogmatic formulations towards the religious imperative of the imitation of Christ'.⁶ This perspective has coexisted with a much more prosaic outlook on the nexus between antitrinitarianism and toleration, one which reduces antitrinitarian defences of the right to dissent to a matter of personal interest. In his survey of the development of the idea of toleration in Western thought, for instance, Henry Kamen premised a section on 'The Italian anti-Trinitarians' with the assertion that the group 'developed their own doctrines of tolerance in retaliation against the bitter persecution to which they were subjected'.⁷ Here, we may note, the relationship between antitrinitarianism and toleration is inverted: the Italians' rejection of the Trinity is viewed no longer as an offshoot of their commitment to free thought and rational criticism, but as the motivating factor behind this very commitment.

While there is much of value in each of these competing interpretations, it is my aim in this chapter to bring to light certain limitations inherent both in reading the Italians' antitrinitarianism as a corollary of a fundamental commitment to freedom of thought, rationalism, and the priority of Christian morality over doctrinal intransigence, and in reducing it to a motivating factor. My analysis will focus on the ideas put forward by several Italian antitrinitarians in the wake of the execution of Michael Servetus in 1553, the event that provided a catalyst for discussions over the legitimacy of dissent in matters of religion in the areas where the Italian radicals had sought refuge upon leaving the peninsula between the 1540s and late 1550s. On the one hand, I will argue that toleration was itself, in the eyes of the Italians, a matter of doctrine, and not simply of principle; further, I will show how belief in the value of reason played no role in shaping the Italians' approach to the question of free dissent. On the other hand, I will reflect on the extent to which their belief in the falsehood of trinitarian doctrine was entangled with the very arguments they put forward in rejecting the suppression of dissent, rather than simply acting as a spur for their reflections. My discussion will be

⁶ Rotondò, 'Calvino e gli antitrinitari italiani' [1968], in *Studi di storia ereticale*, 1: 318-20: 'nel presupposto che la pratica della vita cristiana dovesse spostarsi dalla rigorosa adesione a formulazioni dogmatiche verso l'imperativo religioso dell'imitazione di Cristo'.

⁷ Kamen, *Rise of Toleration*, 81.

structured in three parts: first, I will look at the Italians' critique of their adversaries' use of religious persecution; second, I will examine their positive arguments in favor of open dissent; and finally, I will assess the place of trinitarian dogma in their discussions. I thus hope to tease out some of the distinctive features of the Italian antitrinitarian approach to freedom of dissent, and to offer an interpretive middle ground in which ideal and interest can meet.

A preliminary caveat is needed here: any attempt to explore the question of the connection between antitrinitarianism and religious freedom in sixteenth-century Italian radical Protestantism is bound to run into a number of difficulties. To begin with, not all Italian opponents of religious coercion who intervened in similar terms in the debate provoked by Servetus's death were antitrinitarians: Camillo Renato, Bartolomeo Silvio, and Mino Celsi, to name but a few, never expressed scepticism towards the Trinity. This obstacle cannot be circumvented by positing that they must have deliberately hidden their beliefs: Renato, for one, was never shy in defending highly heterodox positions on other matters.⁸ A further limit is posed by the patchy nature of the available evidence. The most extreme case is that of Lelio Sozzini, for whose views on the illegitimacy of suppressing heretics we have very few direct sources;⁹ but even where direct statements by the Italians themselves are extant, their usefulness in uncovering their authors' thought is constrained by their varying length, form, and intended audience. Finally, there is the problem of extricating those arguments that more properly characterise the antitrinitarian approach to the legitimacy of dissent from those that the Italians borrowed from the writings of the Savoyard scholar Sebastian Castellio.¹⁰

⁸ On Renato and his thought, see above all Rotondò's critical edition of his works (Camillo Renato, *Opere documenti e testimonianze*, ed. Antonio Rotondò (Florence, 1968)), with extensive commentary. Rotondò rightly highlights the absence of antitrinitarian doctrines in Renato's poem against the execution of Servetus, concluding that Renato, contrary to a common misconception, cannot be considered a forebear of Socinianism (*ibid.*, 328).

⁹ The only direct evidence is an ambiguous statement about the use of spiritual weapons against those who commit spiritual crimes, made in passing in the confession of faith that Sozzini submitted to the Zurich Church in 1555 (Lelio Sozzini, *Opere*, ed. Antonio Rotondò (Florence, 1986), 99). For contemporary testimonies on Sozzini's role in the debate over Servetus's execution, see Sebastian Castellio, *Contra libellum Calvini*, ed. Uwe Plath (Geneva, 2019), 42; Johann Heinrich Hottinger, *Historia ecclesiastica Novi Testamenti*, 9 vols. (Zurich, 1667), 9.2: 419. Théodore de Bèze believed Sozzini to be among the authors of the infamous *De haereticis, an sint persequendi* (1554): see his letter to Heinrich Bullinger of 14 June 1554 (*Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze*, eds. Hippolyte Aubert, Fernand Aubert and Henri Meylan, 43 vols. (Geneva, 1960-2017), 1, n. 45, 129-30). Nonetheless, although this view did at first receive some scholarly support (see e.g. Cantimori, *Eretici italiani*, 165, 182), it has by now definitely been disproved, on the grounds that, by the time Sozzini arrived in Basel early in 1554, *De haereticis* must already have been ready for print (see Uwe Plath, *Calvin und Basel in den Jahren 1552-1556* (Basel, 1974), 141; Rotondò, 'Nota critica', in Sozzini, *Opere*, 309-10).

¹⁰ Castellio himself embraced antitrinitarian positions only towards the end of his life, possibly as a result of his association with Ochino and the Sozzinis (Rotondò, 'Atteggiamenti della vita morale italiana del Cinquecento' [1967], in *Studi di storia ereticale*, 1: 215-20); in his last work, *De arte dubitandi*, composed in the final year of his life (1563), he openly questioned the validity of trinitarian dogma on rationalist grounds (*De arte dubitandi et confidendi, ignorandi et sciendi*, ed. Elizabeth Feist Hirsch (Leiden, 1981), 85-89). In his earliest and most influential work against the punishment of heretics, by contrast, the Trinity is simply listed among indifferent matters (*De haereticis an sint persequendi*, ed. Sape van der Woude (Geneva, 1954), 5).

Castellio's ideas served as a fundamental source of inspiration for Italian critics of religious coercion irrespective of where these critics stood on the question of the Trinity; as a result, similarities across different antitrinitarian works on the illegitimacy of religious coercion are often a product of their shared dependence on Castellio, rather than on their common theological matrix.

The texts discussed here were affected in different measure by the influence of Castellio's thought, and thus offer an opportunity to identify at least some aspects of the Italians' approach that are independent of this influence. They are, in chronological order of composition: a short collection of verses condemning Servetus's execution, composed in all likelihood in Padua, in Matteo Gribaldi's milieu, in the early months of 1554;¹¹ Gribaldi's *Apology for Michael Servetus*, a heated pamphlet on the Spaniard's death penned in 1556 with the collaboration of Celio Secondo Curione and his son Agostino;¹² Bernardino Ochino's *Thirty dialogues*, a two-volume collection of fictional exchanges on thorny issues including trinitarian doctrine, polygamy, and the legitimacy of killing heretics, which caused so much scandal that its author was expelled from Zurich following its publication in 1563;¹³ and Jacopo Aconcio's *Satan's stratagems*, a lengthy treatise that enjoyed so much success as to witness at least seventeen editions in five languages in the century that followed its first appearance in 1564.¹⁴

¹¹ I argue for Gribaldi's at least partial responsibility for these verses in a forthcoming article, 'Celio Secondo Curione and the Question of Religious Coercion', in *La toile de Celio Secondo Curione (1503-1569)*, eds. C. Lastraioli and D. Solfaroli Camillocci. The verses are edited in Alain Dufour, 'Vers latins pour Servet, contre Calvin et contre Genève', in *Histoire politique et psychologie historique. Suivi de deux essais sur Humanisme et Réformation et Le mythe de Genève aux temps de Calvin* (Geneva, 1966), 97-115.

¹² On the dating and composition of this work, see Carlos Gilly, *Spanien und der Basler Buchdruck bis 1600. Ein Querschnitt durch die spanische Geistesgeschichte aus der Sicht einer europäischen Buchdruckerstadt* (Basel, 1985), 298-318. The text of the 'Apologia' is available in two modern editions: the first is to be found in *CO*, 15, n. 1918, coll. 52-63; the second, more recent one is included in a collection of Gribaldi's works, with an English translation, produced by two independent scholars for the Michael Servetus Institute (Matteo Gribaldi Moffa, *Declaratio: Michael Servetus's Revelation of Jesus Christ the Son of God and Other Antitrinitarian Works*, eds. Peter Hughes and Peter Zerner, trans. Peter Zerner (Providence, 2010), 169-99). Neither version, however, is completely reliable; I have therefore chosen to cite directly from the manuscript version (Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, MS KiAr 26a 3, fols. 18r-25v: 'Alphonsi Lyncurii Tarraconensis Apologia pro Michaele Serveto').

¹³ Bernardino Ochino, *Dialogi XXX. In duos libros divisi, quorum primus est de Messia, continetque dialogos xviii. Secundus est, cum de rebus variis, tum potissimum de Trinitate* (Basel: Perna, 1563); my analysis here draws on the second volume, which addresses more directly the problem of coercion. On the events surrounding the publication of this work, see Roland Bainton, *Bernardino Ochino esule e riformatore senese del Cinquecento (1487-1563)*, trans. Elio Gianturco (Florence, 1940), 127-45; Mark Taplin, *The Italian Reformers and the Zurich Church, c. 1540-1620* (Aldershot, 2003), 111-69.

¹⁴ For details on the various editions, see Gordon Kinder, 'Jacobus Acontius', in *Bibliotheca dissidentium. Répertoire de non-conformistes religieux des seizième et dix-septième siècles*, 26 vols, ed. André Séguenry (Baden-Baden, 1980-2008), 16: 101-5. Alongside the two published by Pietro Perna in Basel under Aconcio's supervision (1564 and 1565), Kinder identified six further Latin editions (Basel: Waldkirch, 1610; Oxford: Webb, 1631; Oxford: Webb, 1650; Amsterdam: Ravesteyn, 1652; Nijmegen: Van Hoogenhuyse, 1661; Amsterdam: Ravesteyn, 1664). To these he added five further reported editions (Basel 1616, 1618, 1620; Amsterdam 1631;

While the first two were written in the immediate aftermath of Servetus's burning, and focussed explicitly on the event, the latter two treated the question of religious coercion in more general terms, and never openly mentioned Servetus's case. The verses and the *Apology*, moreover, circulated anonymously or pseudonymously in manuscript form, and thus allowed their author(s) far greater freedom of expression; Ochino's work, by contrast, is deliberately somewhat ambiguous, while Aconcio's work is extremely cautious. Finally, while the earlier works are far shorter, Ochino's and Aconcio's lengthier discussions allow for proportionally greater detail and complexity. Nonetheless, by studying the works in tandem, it is possible to overcome these disparities at least in part, and to gain some insight into the key elements of an account of freedom of dissent that was specific to early Italian antitrinitarian radicalism.

II. Persecution and falsehood

For all their differences in form and tone, the various critiques of religious coercion penned by Italian antitrinitarians in the decade following the death of Servetus were all highly polemical texts. While the verses and the *Apology* adopted a vehemently accusatory rhetoric, the *Dialogues* and the *Stratagems* were more discreet in their attacks and avoided directly naming any of their targets; nonetheless, it was clear to all that their criticisms were aimed at the leaders of the Reformed Churches, in Switzerland and beyond. The verse collection laid the blame for Servetus's execution squarely on Calvin, whom it portrayed as domineering and bloodthirsty, and on the Genevan ministers: they could not bear Servetus, for 'he contradicted their doctrine and derided their dogmas'; but since they did not dare to kill him themselves, they had persuaded the city authorities to execute him, like the Jews who turned to Pilate to kill Christ.¹⁵ The *Apology*, likewise, targeted Calvin directly, and insisted on the Genevan ministers' personal animosity and vindictiveness towards Servetus.¹⁶ Ochino blasted contemporary ministers for imposing their beliefs on the Church and condemning as heretics

London 1648) which he was unable to locate. The Universitätsbibliothek of Freiburg im Breisgau holds a copy (classmark N 2504,bi) of what appears to be yet another edition, unknown to Kinder, published by Ravesteyn in Amsterdam in 1661. To these we may add, following Kinder, Perna's French edition of 1565; a reprint of the French version (Delft: Schinkel, 1611); a German translation (Basel: s.n., 1647); at least three editions in Dutch, translated by Johannes de la Haye (The Hague: Van Wouw, 1660; The Hague: s.n., 1660; Amsterdam: Boekholt, 1660; plus a further edition reported in Amsterdam, 1662); and two different English translations (London: Macock, 1648 [i.e. 1647], with only the first half of the text in John Goodwin's translation; and London: Macock, 1651). References in this article are drawn from Jacopo Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, ed. Giorgio Radetti (Florence, 1946).

¹⁵ Dufour, 'Vers latins', 113: 'contradicebat doctrinae eorum et illorum dogmata irridebat'.

¹⁶ Gribaldi, 'Apologia', fols. 18r-19r, 20r-21r, 24r-v.

all who disagreed;¹⁷ indeed, in his account, corrupt ministers were often to be blamed for heresy itself, for they either taught falsehoods, or brought good doctrine into contempt through their bad mores, or fostered heresy through mutual hatred and envy.¹⁸ And Aconcio repeatedly returned to the deficiencies of Church leaders, who, he claimed, were more prone than others to impatience and resentment towards those who dissented from their views, trusting in their own learning and authority; their powers, he argued, should be limited, lest they establish a ‘tyranny’ in the Church, policing people’s beliefs and imposing their position by force.¹⁹

This peculiar anxiety surrounding the growing authority of the clergy over the new Protestant Churches stemmed in part from the Italian exiles’ direct experience of ecclesiastical overreach in their native soil. Ochino’s comments are revealing: in ‘exert[ing] tyranny over men’s consciences’, he charged, the Reformed ministers acted as ‘Popes and earthly gods’.²⁰ Dialogue XXVIII of his collection, where he tackled directly the question of the legitimacy of killing heretics, was presented as a discussion between Pope Pius IV and the reform-minded cardinal Giovanni Morone, with the Pope defending the suppression of heresy through arguments drawn from the writings of the Reformed thinker Théodore de Bèze: the point, as every knowing reader would immediately have perceived, was at once to stress that religious persecution was a Popish practice, and to condemn the Reformed for falling into the same error as their adversaries. The parallel between Roman and Reformed persecutory practices was an irresistibly effective argument in the eyes of the Italians: the anti-Genevan verses derided Calvin as ‘another Pontiff’,²¹ and insisted on drawing an analogy between Rome and Geneva;²² the *Apology* echoed the verses’ claim that the Protestants even surpassed the Catholics in cruelty, for the latter at least strangled their victims before burning them;²³ Aconcio pointed out that in imposing their views over their congregations and persecuting those who refused to subscribe to their doctrines, Protestant ministers arrogated that same right which they forcefully condemned in the Pope,²⁴ and he concluded his treatise with an impassioned peroration in

¹⁷ Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 269.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 417-18.

¹⁹ On tyranny (*tyrannis*) in the Church, see in particular Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 454-56, but also 138, 200, 218-20, 254, 408, 546, 574, 580, 590. Critiques of Church leaders and of their powers are to be found *passim* throughout the text; for a few prominent examples, see 4, 44-46, 214, 248, 292, 398, 448-50, 592.

²⁰ Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 269: ‘in hominum conscientias tyrannidem exercere’; ‘quosdam Papas terrenosque deos’.

²¹ Dufour, ‘Vers latins’, 112: ‘alium pontificem’; see also 109 and 111.

²² *Ibid.*, 112-14.

²³ Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fol. 23r; cf. Dufour, ‘Vers latins’, 113.

²⁴ Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 544-46.

which he warned his fellow Protestants that ‘[t]here is no one among us who does not carry his own Papacy in [his] chest’.²⁵

The Italians’ insistence on the Popish character of Reformed repressive practices was more than simply a rhetorical strategy or a product of the image of persecution carried with them from the peninsula: it was grounded in their perception that by adopting coercive methods, the Reformed had strayed from true doctrine. Commenting on the relationship between Catholic and Protestant persecutory practices, Gribaldi accused the ‘Evangelicals’ of having condemned the Roman Church as ‘the seat of the Antichrist and synagogue of Satan’ when the matters under dispute were of minor importance, only to then change their tune when Servetus had dared to question a more fundamental doctrine: suddenly, they turned to claiming that ‘the Church of the Antichrist holds excellent views on the Trinity, and indeed on the burning of heretics’.²⁶ There followed no less than sixteen New Testament citations stressing the importance of charity and forgiveness; ‘these’, Gribaldi concluded, ‘are Christ’s words, these the oracles of the Holy Spirit, which should have been fixed in your Evangelical hearts’, rather than ‘embracing the dogma and rite of the impious to the perdition of [your] neighbour’ and ‘agreeing with the Antichristians in torturing the faithful’.²⁷ The Reformed, in other words, had failed to appreciate the message of Scripture on the matter of suppressing heresy: this was not simply a question of principled commitment to freedom and tolerance, but of correctly interpreting divine mandates. For the Italians, the question of whether heretics may legitimately be coerced was to be resolved on theological grounds, with appeals to Scripture and careful exegeses of relevant passages, such as the parable of the tares at Matthew 13:24-30 or Paul’s injunction to avoid obstinate heretics at Titus 3:10.²⁸

Scripture, then, demanded that heretics not be suppressed, but that they be treated with moderation, and at most admonished or shunned; to do otherwise was to fundamentally misunderstand the message put forward in explicit terms by Christ and the Apostles. Perhaps the most prominent running theme in all four Italian antitrinitarian critiques of religious

²⁵ Ibid., 596: ‘Nemo est nostrum, qui non suum in pectore papatum gestet’. See also 402, where the analogy with Catholic practices is mobilised to condemn aspects of the Reformed approach to ecclesiastical discipline. Further parallels between Protestants and Catholics are also to be found at 34 and 320-24.

²⁶ Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fol. 23r: ‘Antichristi sedem et Satanæ synagogam’; ‘Anticristi ecclesia de sancta trinitate optime sentit: nec non et de hæreticis comburendis’.

²⁷ Ibid., fol. 23v: ‘hæ sunt Cristi uoces, hæc spiritus sancti oracular, quæ cordibus uestris euangelicis infixæ esse debuerant, non impiorum dogma et ritum in proximi perditione amplecti non cum anticristianis ad fidelium supplicia conuenire.’

²⁸ For the parable of the tares, see Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fols. 23v, 25r; Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 396-97; Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 222-44; for Paul’s precept to avoid heretics, Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fols. 19v, 23v; Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 404-5, 415-16.

coercion was the essential incompatibility between the use of force against religious dissenters and ‘Christian piety, Evangelical charity’, and the model of ‘Christ’s humility, patience, kindness, tolerance, and mercy’;²⁹ the cruelty inherent in the Reformed leaders’ approach was a symptom of their doctrinal waywardness. The verses on Servetus’s burning reproached the Genevan ecclesiastical leadership with biting sarcasm: ‘did Christ, whom you boast of as your head, teach you to light flames thus?’³⁰ Ochino reminded his readers that the Christian spirit is ‘a spirit of piety, charity, modesty, clemency, affability, that seeks to bring salvation following Christ’s example’, and contrasted this spirit with the tendency to exert rigour in punishment.³¹ And Aconcio insistently stressed the importance of applying Christian charity and forgiveness when dealing with brothers whom one disagreed with, for ‘what opinion can you form of one in whom there is no charity and who does not love his brother, if not that he has not yet known God?’³² Underlying the Italians’ attacks on religious persecution, in sum, was a reading of Christianity that prioritised a form of conduct modelled on Christ’s example over disagreement in doctrine. But if Wilbur’s and Rotondò’s statements are undoubtedly correct in this regard, this should not lead us to believe that truth in matters of doctrine was of secondary importance for the Italians: on the contrary, as we shall see, the quest for truth was at the very core of their plea for the legitimacy of dissent.

III. Dissent and truth

While the authoritarian imposition of Church leaders’ views was a sure sign of these leaders’ doctrinal corruption, true believers, for the Italians, were meek and suffered with patience. Gribaldi reminded his readers that ‘Ignatius, Irenaeus, Augustine, and the other orthodox Fathers [...] stated that God’s true Church is given to suffering, not to persecuting’,³³ and that Christ had predicted ‘that the pious would suffer persecution and be afflicted by those who knew neither his Father nor him.’³⁴ And Ochino remarked that ‘heretics are both many in

²⁹ Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fol. 23r: ‘Cristiana pietas, euangelica charitas, [...] Cristi humilitatem, patientiam, benignitatem, longanimitatem et misericordiam’.

³⁰ Dufour, ‘Vers latins’, 111: ‘Ten’ sic edocuit Genevae ecclesia Christus, / Quem jactas caput esse tuum, succendere flammam?’

³¹ Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 393-94: ‘pietatis, charitatis, modestiae, clementiae, comitatis spiritus, qui exemplo Christi salutem dare studeat’.

³² Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 338: ‘In quo autem non sit charitas quive suum non diligit fratrem, quod facere de eo possis iudicium, nisi quod Deum nondum noverit?’; see also 6-8, 48, 82, 94, 98, 102, 114-16, 204-06, 302-04, 328-38, 350, 354-56, 362, 396-98, 400-02, 406-08, 456, 502, 506. On Christ’s example of love and message of forgiveness, see 115-16, 330, 334-40, 398.

³³ Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fol. 19v: ‘Ignatius, Ireneus, Augustinus et caeteri patres orthodoxi [...] ueram dei ecclesiam pati non persequi solere dixerunt’.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 24r: ‘quod pii persecutionem paterentur et affligerentur ab ijs qui nec patrem nec ipsum cognoscerent.’

number and among powerful and influential men, and are held to be Evangelicals; while on the contrary true, sincere, and saintly Christians both are few in number, and are considered heretics'.³⁵ Persecution thus marked the dividing line between true and false belief; and the reason for this was that those who held the truth had no need for force to defend their views, while those who professed falsehoods had no better instrument at their disposal. The anti-Genevan verses accused Calvin of killing Servetus because he was unable to persuade him through words.³⁶ Ochino pointed out that violent persecution did nothing but strengthen heretics' convictions, for they reasoned that '[i]f these people could convince us through reasons or through God's word, they would never use force.'³⁷ And Aconcio declared that true doctrine was sometimes labelled and persecuted as heresy in order to ensure that it would be silenced before it could be heard, for 'if he who is said to have seduced the people were given the opportunity to defend his cause, since the force of truth is such as it is, when compared with falsehoods it could not fail to be recognised'.³⁸

This confidence in the inherent force of truth was a common feature of the Italians' writings against religious coercion. The verses proclaimed that Geneva was mistaken if it believed that it had buried true religion by burning Servetus, for from his ashes many others would arise who would defend Christ.³⁹ Ochino, in a manuscript dialogue written to defend himself following the scandal caused by the *Thirty dialogues*, stated that there could be no harm in calling into doubt any theological matter, for the more truth is discussed, 'the more it shines and reveals itself to be splendid and glorious.'⁴⁰ Aconcio insisted that truth was naturally bound to prevail when defended by legitimate means, while those who turned to violence

³⁵ Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 388: 'hæretici & numero multi sint, & in hominibus potentes atque gratiosi, proque Euangelicis habeantur: cum contrà veri, sinceri, sanctique Christiani, & numero pauci sint, & hæretici iudicentur'.

³⁶ Dufour, 'Vers latins', 111.

³⁷ Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 385: 'Si nos isti rationibus aut Dei seromne possent conuincere, nunquam vim adhiberent.' Aconcio likewise pointed out that there was nothing more apt to strengthening obstinacy in error than aggressive conduct in religious disagreements, for those who behaved thus inevitably generated the persuasion that 'since they are unable to defend their cause through reasoning, they have placed all defence in force and arrogance alone' (Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 40: 'cum ratione tueri eorum causam nequeant, in sola vi atque insolentia praesidium sibi omne collocasse').

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 470: 'si ei, qui seduxisse populum dicatur, daretur sui defendendi copia, cum tanta sit veritatis vis, quanta est, cum imposturis collata non posset non agnosci'.

³⁹ Dufour, 'Vers latins', 111-12.

⁴⁰ The text of the dialogue is available in two slightly different versions: an autograph manuscript (London, British Library, Additional MS 28568, fols. 13r-22r) and an eighteenth-century edition based on a different manuscript (Johann Georg Schelhorn, *Ergötzlichkeiten aus der Kirchenhistorie und Literatur*, 3 vols. (Ulm and Leipzig: Albrecht Friederich Bartholomaeus, 1764), 3: 2009-35). My citation here is drawn from, respectively, fol. 14v: 'quanto e piu agitata et discussa, tanto piu risplende, et si scuopre illustre et gloriosa'; and 2013: 'quanto più è agitata e discussa, tanto più risplende e: si discopre illustre e gloriosa.' Aconcio even went so far as to claim that heretics could be greatly beneficial to the Church, for they stimulated the pious to examine Scripture more carefully and diligently (*Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 236).

showed that they did not fight strenuously enough through the word of God: pastors should therefore refrain from abandoning that weapon ‘by which alone we are allowed to fight and are always able to win’.⁴¹ In Book VI of the *Stratagemas*, he developed this belief in the force of truth into an articulate argument in favour of the legitimacy of dissent in matters of religion. If each person were free to worship and defend the religion they preferred, he argued, a great diversity of opinions would inevitably arise; the resulting doubt as to which one was correct would stimulate many to search for the truth, and with many looking for it, someone would undoubtedly find it; ‘once the truth has been found, moreover, if there is freedom to speak (*disserendi libertas*), once a comparison between opinions has been carried out, it is bound to prevail’. It was for this reason that Satan’s kingdom could not resist for long where there was ‘freedom of opinion in matters of religion’ (*opinionum de religione libertate*).⁴²

This account of the means by which truth came forth rested on a view of the relationship between truth and time which was alien to the Italians’ Reformed adversaries: while the latter maintained that all fundamental religious truths had been plainly made manifest and remained unchanged over time, but simply required a continual exercise in clarification, the Italians believed in the possibility of a historical progression towards new and better truths. This depended in part on their religious epistemology: all of them shared the persuasion that the only valid source of truth was direct divine inspiration; in Aconcio’s words, ‘no one can attain divine matters unless he be assisted by the divine spirit’.⁴³ This spirit could touch anyone at any time; as Gribaldi explained, ‘[e]very day God arouses new spirits to the revelation of the truth and of His judgments, and He will continually arouse them until the end of time; nor can any man flatter himself that he alone above everyone else has been enlightened, that to him alone all truth has been revealed’.⁴⁴ The quest for truth thus became never-ending: Aconcio declared that ‘although in our age the Gospel has almost come back to life, nonetheless’ one must ‘see again and again whether there is any remaining stain, or some part which has not

⁴¹ Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 246-50; 248: ‘quo uno et pugnare nobis licet et vincere semper possumus’.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 412: ‘inventā porro veritate si disserendi sit libertas, facta sententiarum collatione, illa superior evadat necesse est.’

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 116: ‘divinas res assequi nemo possit nisi divino adiutus spiritu’. It should be stressed that this divine inspiration was not regarded by the Italians as an alternative to Scriptural revelation: rather, it was the necessary instrument for the correct interpretation of Scripture.

⁴⁴ Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fols. 21v-22r: ‘Quotidie Deus novos spiritus excitat ad reuelationem ueritatis et iudiciorum suorum: et usque in finem seculi iugiter excitabit: neque quisquam hominum sibi blandiri queat se unum super omnes illustratum, sibi uni omnem ueritatem patefactam’. Cf. Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 124 and 372.

been restored fully enough to its ancient purity and ancient candour.⁴⁵ The result was a view of Christian history as a series of successive revelations whereby truth was restored and refined: Servetus, for instance, was presented by Gribaldi as the most recent in a series of divinely-inspired heralds of truth, following Luther, whose ‘spirit, as God willed, was aroused’ to call into question many truths long accepted in the Church,⁴⁶ and Zwingli, who, equipped ‘with a burning new spirit’, went further than Luther himself.⁴⁷

The need to allow free dissent in matters of religion thus acquired a particular significance in the Italians’ account of the progression towards truth: freedom of expression was the fundamental condition to allow revealed truth to shine forth. Ochino declared that the key to rectifying errors in the Church was to listen to all to whom truth had been revealed,⁴⁸ and Gribaldi stated that ‘no spirit is to be condemned, but all things are to be tried (as Paul says) and that which has been good is to be embraced’.⁴⁹ But it was Aconcio, once again, that elaborated this point most fully. Citing I Corinthians 14, he produced an extensive defence of the need to reintroduce the ancient practice of free prophecy in the Church, whereby all who felt inspired to reveal a truth should be granted room to speak; this ‘freedom to prophesy’ (*prophetandi libertatem*) would not only guarantee that those who held better revelations would have ‘the faculty to speak’ (*loquendi potestatem*), but also stimulate others to hope in the possibility of attaining revelation themselves, and thus to read Scripture.⁵⁰ This commitment to free prophetic revelation also shaped Aconcio’s discussion of other themes, such as the proper form for Church councils and the usefulness of confessions of faith: councils should be accessible to ‘anyone in whom there seems to be some piety and spirit’,⁵¹ and convened in such a way that, ‘having given to each the free faculty to speak, those to whom it pleased God to reveal something relevant may speak and say what they believe’;⁵² fixed statements of faith,

⁴⁵ Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 290: ‘etsi aetate nostra quasi revixit evangelium, [...] videndum [...] est etiam atque etiam, reliquane sit labes ulla, aut sitne parte aliqua ad pristinam suam puritatem pristinumque candorem non satis plene restitutum.’

⁴⁶ Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fol. 21v: ‘spiritus (ut deo placuit) [...] excitatus fuit’.

⁴⁷ Ibid., fol. 22r: ‘feruente [...] nouo spiritu’. For Servetus as a divinely inspired spirit, see further, fol. 23r.

⁴⁸ Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 375.

⁴⁹ Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fol. 21v: ‘nullus spiritus contemnendus est, sed omnia probanda (ut inquit Paulus) et quod bonum fuerit amplectendum’; cf. I Thessalonians 5:19-21.

⁵⁰ Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 292-304.

⁵¹ Ibid., 316: ‘in quocunque aliquid esse videatur pietatis atque spiritus’.

⁵² Ibid., 310: ‘facta cuique libera dicendi potestate, quibus placuerit Domino aliquid, quod ad rem faciat, patefacere, ii verba faciant dicantque quod sentiunt’.

on the other hand, were to be rejected, for they promoted excessive attachment to received interpretations and left no room for new revelations.⁵³

The Italians' belief in direct inspiration had two further corollary consequences. The first followed naturally from the view that revelation was open to all, irrespective of learning, for it depended solely on God's will: it was a marked antipathy towards claims to superiority based on erudition. Ochino affirmed that 'the learned, since they are generally more vain, curious, and arrogant than everyone else, latch onto errors more easily than everyone else',⁵⁴ 'if the truth has been revealed to some illiterate man', he proclaimed, the learned 'must stay silent and believe him, and approve as an oracle whatever God speaks through his mouth.'⁵⁵ And Aconcio routinely insisted on the limitations of erudition, which fuelled pride and inane cavillations;⁵⁶ no one should be deprived of the freedom to study Scripture, 'not even if he is a porter',⁵⁷ and learned men should not be ashamed of being instructed by lowly, uneducated people, for indeed God was more likely to reveal His truth to those who could not attribute their better understanding to their own skill and efforts.⁵⁸ The second consequence may come as a greater surprise to those who regard a commitment to the role of reason in religious investigation as a defining feature of the antitrinitarian movement: the Italians either had nothing to say about the value of human reason,⁵⁹ or dismissed it altogether. Most explicit in this sense was, once again, Aconcio: the 'judgment of reason', he declared, 'is an instrument

⁵³ Ibid., 510-12, again citing I Corinthians 14:30 and I Thessalonians 5:20-21. Aconcio's concern with the use of confessions of faith must have been driven at least in part by his relations with Italian radicals living in the subject territories of the Three Leagues of Rhaetia, today roughly corresponding to the area between northwestern Lombardy and the southeastern canton of Graubünden. Here, in 1561, a controversy had broken out over the imposition of subscription to an orthodox confession of faith for all new members of the Reformed Church of Chiavenna, a measure adopted in response to the perceived rise in the number of antitrinitarians and Anabaptists (on this conflict, see Cantimori, *Eretici italiani*, 285-87; Taplin, *The Italian Reformers*, 217-20). This was only the most conspicuous in a number of instances of the use of confessions of faith against Italian antitrinitarians in the decade prior to the publication of the *Stratagemata*: in 1557, Gribaldi had been tried for his antitrinitarian views in Bern, and forced to sign an orthodox confession (for details, see Diego Quaglioni, 'Gribaldi Moffa, Matteo', DBI 59 (2002), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/matteo-gribaldi-moffa_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/); and in 1558, a trinitarian confession had been imposed on the Italian Church in Geneva (see Luca Addante, *Valentino Gentile e il dissenso religioso nel Cinquecento. Dalla Riforma italiana al radicalismo europeo* (Pisa, 2014), 127-54).

⁵⁴ Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 420: 'eruditi [...], quia plerumque caeteris sunt vaniores, curiosiores, ac superbiore, facilius errores hauriunt quam caeteri.'

⁵⁵ Ibid., 375: 'si cui illiterato patefacta fuerit veritas, tacere debent, eique credere, & vt oraculum approbare quicquid deus illius ore eloquitur.'

⁵⁶ Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 14-6, 34-6, 138-42, 496, 570.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 424: 'ne quidem si sit baiulus'.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 128, 296-98, 312, 358. Among Aconcio's favorite Scriptural citations was Matthew 11:25, where Christ declared that God had hidden His truths 'from the wise and prudent, and [...] revealed them unto babes' (cf. Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 124, 428, 432). This same passage is also cited in Ochino's defensive dialogue: BL Additional MS 28568, fol. 15v; Schelhorn, *Ergötzlichkeiten*, 3: 2015.

⁵⁹ The function of reason is never addressed in either the anti-Genevan verses or the 'Apologia'.

of Satan and danger itself, not an aid to any wholesome deliberation’;⁶⁰ doctrinal matters ‘should be evaluated not through our judgment or wit, but through divine wisdom, revealed to us from on high, whatever reason dictates’.⁶¹ These words, it should be noted, were written around the same time as Sebastian Castellio’s notorious exaltation of the power of human reason in adjudicating religious matters:⁶² behind a shared agenda, similar arguments, and even a joint effort could lie radically different perspectives.⁶³

IV. Antitrinitarianism and toleration

The approach to the question of religious dissent that we have examined thus far was not unique to critics of the Trinity: virtually all these same arguments are also to be found in the writings of other Italian radicals who did not espouse antitrinitarian views. Both Camillo Renato and Mino Celsi, for instance, insisted on the parallel between Catholic and Protestant persecutory practices;⁶⁴ Bartolomeo Silvio explicitly defended free prophecy, citing the same Scriptural passages as Aconcio.⁶⁵ Many of these parallels were undoubtedly due to the Italians’

⁶⁰ Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 462: ‘rationis iudicio [...] Satanae instrumentum [...] est ipsaque perniciis, non ad ullum salubre adiumentum’; see also 352.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 210: ‘Hasce res non nostro aut iudicio aut ingenio metiri oportet, sed divina sapientia coelitus nobis patefacta, quicquid ratio dicit’. This aspect of Aconcio’s thought has largely escaped the attention of scholars, with many eminent commentators labelling him a rationalist: see Wilbur Kitchener Jordan (*The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, 1: 303-65), Charles Donald O’Malley (*Jacopo Aconcio*, trans. Delio Cantimori (Rome, 1955), 123-66), Philippe Denis (‘Un combat aux frontières de l’orthodoxie: la controverse entre Acontius et Des Gallars sur la question du fondement et des circonstances de l’Église’, *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 28 (1976), 61), Luigi Firpo (‘La chiesa italiana di Londra nel Cinquecento e i suoi rapporti con Ginevra’, in *Scritti sulla Riforma in Italia* (Naples, 1996), 130); cf. also Patrick Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal 1519-1583: The Struggle for a Reformed Church* (London, 1979), 136; Pietro Adamo, ‘Da Aconcio a Locke: fallibilismo e libera sperimentazione nelle riflessioni europee sulla tolleranza’, in *Tolleranza e libertà*, ed. Vittorio Dini (Milan, 2001), 27; and Delio Cantimori, ‘Aconcio, Iacopo’, *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 1 (1960), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/iacopo-aconcio_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/, claiming that the *Stratagemata* approach a form of ‘rationalist deism’ (‘teismo razionalistico’). Only a few have challenged this orthodoxy: Paolo Rossi, for instance, took a radically different position, insisting on Aconcio’s rejection of the value of reason in theological enquiry (*Giacomo Aconcio*, (Milan, 1952), 65-88); and Aart de Groot has critiqued Jordan’s and Collinson’s interpretation of the role of reason in Aconcio’s thought (‘Acontius’s Plea for Tolerance’, in *From Strangers to Citizens: The Integration of Immigrant Communities in Britain, Ireland and Colonial America, 1550-1750*, eds. Randolph Vigne and Charles Littleton (Brighton, 2011), 52 and 54).

⁶² See Castellio, *De arte dubitandi*, 59-77.

⁶³ On the distance between Ochino and Castellio on this point, see Massimo Firpo, ‘“Boni Christiani merito vocantur haeretici”. Bernardino Ochino e la tolleranza’, in *La formazione storica della alterità. Studi di storia della tolleranza nell’età moderna offerti a Antonio Rotondò*, 3 vols., eds. Henry Méchoulan, Richard H. Popkin, Giuseppe Ricuperati and Luisa Simonutti (Florence, 2001), 1: 186-90. Their disagreement on this matter did not impede their collaboration: Castellio was responsible for translating Ochino’s dialogues into Latin.

⁶⁴ Renato, ‘In Ioannem Calvinum de iniusto Michaelis Serveti incendio’, in *Opere documenti e testimonianze*, vv. 158-59, 212-13; Mino Celsi, *In haeticis coërcendis quatenus progredi liceat. Poems – Correspondence*, ed. Peter Bietenholz (Naples, 1982), 9-11, 32, 35, 119, 155, 163, 185, 187, 233, 239, 243, 245-46, 260, 272, 277, 285, 291, 295, 304, 348, 350, 354, 383-84, 399.

⁶⁵ See Silvio’s autograph copy of this text, included in a letter to Bullinger of 26 September 1570: Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, MS F 61, fol. 345r, citing I Corinthians 14 and I Thessalonians 5:21.

shared dependence on Sebastian Castellio's *On heretics* (1554): references to the parable of the tares,⁶⁶ to Gamaliel's opposition to the punishment of the Apostles,⁶⁷ to Christ's critique of John and James for wanting to imitate Elijah's violence against his enemies,⁶⁸ and to Paul's injunction to avoid obstinate heretics;⁶⁹ or appeals to the argument that heretics bear no fault because they err unknowingly,⁷⁰ that it is impossible to distinguish with certainty between true and false believers,⁷¹ that persecution achieves nothing other than false professions of repentance,⁷² and so on, were first laid out together in Castellio's work, and those who adopted them in subsequent years can reasonably be assumed to have borrowed them from him, either directly or second hand.⁷³ The question arises, then, of what, if anything, was specific about the Italian antitrinitarian contribution to the debate over the legitimacy of dissent. Did the Italians' views on the Trinity have any weight at all in shaping their arguments? Or are they simply one potential factor among those that drove these authors to write, joining a chorus of heterodox believers who were keen to defend their own right to speak?

It is hardly possible to provide a straightforward, univocal answer to this question, for each of the texts discussed above makes room in different measure for discussions of trinitarian doctrine in the context of the issue of coercion. Ochino's *Dialogues* did treat the Trinity at length; but in the dialogue dedicated specifically to the question of whether heretics should be suppressed, we find little more than a few oblique references to the antitrinitarians' plight.⁷⁴

⁶⁶ See note 28 above.

⁶⁷ Gribaldi, 'Apologia', fols. 19v-20r, 25r; Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 400.

⁶⁸ Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 393-95; Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 338-40.

⁶⁹ See note 28 above.

⁷⁰ Gribaldi, 'Apologia', fols. 21r-v; Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 382-84, 410.

⁷¹ Gribaldi, 'Apologia', fol. 21r; Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 389, 416-17; cf. Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 92, 236-42.

⁷² Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 384, 386; Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 256-60, 396.

⁷³ The anti-Genevan verses are alone among the Italians' critiques of coercion in bearing no sign whatsoever of Castellio's influence: they make use of none of the standard *loci* and arguments of the sort exemplified here. Insofar as they were probably composed in Padua around March 1554 (see my article 'Celio Secondo Curione'), when Castellio's *De haereticis* had only just appeared in print, it is likely that their author had no knowledge of Castellio's work. Castellio, for his part, came across the verses when they began to circulate in Switzerland between late March and early April of 1554 (see Castellio, *Contra libellum Calvinii*, 42-43), and may himself have drawn inspiration from them. The verses' polemical claim that the Genevan would have burned Christ himself had he returned into the world (Dufour, 'Vers latins', 111), for instance, was picked up in Castellio's two attacks on Calvin and Bèze respectively, where the Savoyard elaborated it into a critique of the Reformed emphasis on learning: had Christ returned, Castellio declared, the Reformed would have rejected him unless he spoke Latin (Castellio, *Contra libellum Calvinii*, 98, 111; Sebastian Castellio, *De l'impunité des hérétiques / De haereticis non puniendis*, eds. Bruno Becker and Marius Valkhoff (Geneva, 1971), 93, 161).

⁷⁴ In the latter part of Dialogue XXVIII, Moronus provides a list of conditions that must be met before a heretic may legitimately be killed, each of which is discussed in some detail. When Pius interrogates him over the ninth condition, namely, that the heretic must 'have attempted to draw others from the worship of the true God to [that of] false gods' ('conatus fuerit alios à veri dei ad falsorum deorum cultum pellicere'), and asks whether someone who 'draw[s] another away from the worship of three persons, in fear that he might worship three gods, and

Aconcio remained even more cautious, and never once used the word ‘*trinitas*’ or related terms in his work. Nonetheless, the *Stratagems* are scattered with subtle references to arguments and concerns common among antitrinitarians at the time;⁷⁵ and in a few cases, these played some role in shaping the nature of his claims on coercion. An obvious example is his insistence on the need to avoid as far as possible words and phrases that were not present in Scripture when conducting religious debates or seeking a statement of faith that may be accepted by all:⁷⁶ here an argument generally used by antitrinitarians in order to contest the use of terms associated to trinitarian doctrine, such as ‘trinity’, ‘unity’, ‘distinction’, ‘person’, ‘coeternal’, ‘consubstantial’, and so forth,⁷⁷ was turned into an instrument to compose the differences that led to persecution. Perhaps even more notable is his omission of the Trinity from the list of

incite[s] him to the worship of one God’ (‘alterum à cultu trium personarum auocaret, metu ne tres deos coleret, eumque ad vnus dei cultum impelleret’) is to be executed, Moronus responds that ‘[e]ven if he were to err in drawing [another] away from the worship of three persons’ (‘Etiam si in eo peccaret quòd eum à cultu trium personarum auocaret’), the ninth condition would not be met, for he would still ‘invite [this other person] to the worship not of a false, but of the true god’ (‘non ad falsi, sed ad veri dei cultum inuitaret’); Ochino, *Dialogi XXX*, 410-11. Shortly thereafter, Moronus lays out the twelfth condition, namely, that the heretic ‘must have professed that he accepts Scripture, and knows God and Christ’ (‘professus fuerit admittere se sacras literas, deumque & Christum cognoscere’). Pius then asks what to do in the case of a Turk who has become Christian and ‘profess[ed] that he believes not only those things which are contained in the Apostolic Creed, but also [those which are contained] in the Athanasian Creed, and thus believes that Christ is God’s natural son, coeternal and consubstantial to the Father; and then, having changed his mind, [says] that Christ is God’s son not by nature, but only by grace and participation, and thereby blaspheme[s] God, making Christ a mere creature and depriving him of [his] divinity, and making him inferior to the Father’ (‘seque credere profiteretur non solum quæ in apostolorum, verum etiam quæ in Athanasij symbolo continentur, ideoque credere se Christum esse dei filium naturalem, patri coæternum & consubstantialem: & postea mutata sententia diceret, Christum non esse natura dei filium, sed tantum gratia & participatione atque ita deum blasphemaret, Christum meram creaturam faciendo, & diuinitate priuando, patrique inferiorem faciendo’). Moronus’s ambiguous response is that the magistrate may execute him only if he ‘knows that Christ is God’s son, consubstantial to the Father, and that from the words not of men, but of God’ (‘sciret [...] Christum esse dei filium, patri consubstantialem, idque non ex hominum, sed dei verbis’); *ibid.*, 413-14. A further indication of Ochino’s antitrinitarian commitments may also be found in his choice to dedicate Dialogue XXVIII to Sigismund II of Poland-Lithuania, ruler of the territory where an increasing number of Italian antitrinitarians were finding refuge in those years (378). Finally, the second and third conditions in Ochino’s list—that heretics must be subjects of the magistrate by whom they are tried and that their crime must have been committed within that magistrate’s territorial jurisdiction (408)—may perhaps be intended as subtle references to the case of Servetus, who, as Gribaldi had also pointed out (‘Apologia’, fol. 19r), had illegitimately been tried by the Genevans for a crime committed outside of their jurisdiction.

⁷⁵ Alongside the examples discussed below, one thinks, for instance, of his rejection of speculative doctrines (Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 78), which is reminiscent of antitrinitarian dismissals of the Trinity as useless and speculative; or of his critique of the Church Fathers for contaminating the purity of ancient dogmas with philosophical reasoning (42; cf. also 564), a favourite claim of those who contested the Apostolic origin of trinitarian doctrine.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 42, 256, 288-92, 518-20.

⁷⁷ For a subtle use of this argument, see e.g. Lelio Sozzini’s confession of faith of 1555 (*Opere*, 95-96); although Sozzini never explicitly connected this argument to a rejection of terms associated to trinitarian doctrine, Bullinger immediately recognised the implications of his claims (see his letter to Sozzini of 10 July 1555, *ibid.*, 240-42). But see also, for instance, the list of questions posed to the Zurich theologians by the radicals of the Three Leagues in the context of the controversy over the imposition of confessions of faith referenced above at note 53: the sixth point, in particular, pertains to the imposition of statements on the Trinity which include words that are not present in Scripture (Trechsel, Friedrich, *Lelio Sozzini und die Antitrinitarier seiner Zeit* (Heidelberg, 1844), Appendix V, 417).

fundamentals he proposed as an instrument to determine which matters could be considered indifferent and debated freely, and which entailed exclusion from the universal Church: the minimal statement he provided began with the ambiguous claim that ‘there is one God, and he whom He sent, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit’, and ‘that it is incorrect to deny that the Father and Son are different, for Jesus Christ is truly the son of God’;⁷⁸ while granting freedom of expression to critics of the Trinity, this excluded a Sabellian emphasis on the equality of God and Christ,⁷⁹ a favourite target of antitrinitarian polemics in these years.⁸⁰

In the earlier works on Servetus’s death, by contrast, the rejection of the Trinity plays a structural role within the critique of coercive practices laid out by the text. The anti-Genevan verses explicitly portrayed Servetus as ‘a pious disciple of Christ’⁸¹ and a martyr for the truth;⁸² they invited readers to read Servetus’s writings with an unprejudiced mind, claiming they would find them to be truthful,⁸³ and suggested that the Genevans’ use of illegitimate persecutory practices may be directly connected to their rejection of the correct understanding of Christ’s nature.⁸⁴ Likewise, the *Apology* openly endorsed Servetus’s doctrine, launching vehement attacks on the Trinity and defending Servetus’s right to present views that were wholly unproblematic;⁸⁵ while Servetus had sought to further the progress of Evangelical truth, moving beyond the superficial matters treated by his predecessors and turning to the core of Christian doctrine, his adversaries had critiqued Papal abuses only later to embrace the Papists’

⁷⁸ Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 522: ‘unus sit verus Deus et is, quem ille misit Jesus Christus, et spiritus sanctus’; ‘quod non recte negatur alius esse pater, alius esse filius, quia Jesus Christus vere sit Dei filius’.

⁷⁹ Aconcio attacked Sabellianism explicitly elsewhere in the text: Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 194-96.

⁸⁰ The Italian antitrinitarian Valentino Gentile, for instance, had condemned the Reformed position on the Trinity as Sabellian (see Addante, *Valentino Gentile*, 186; cf. also 138). And around the time that Aconcio was composing the *Stratagemata*, in September 1563, Gregor Paweł, a Polish follower of Gentile and of the Italian “tritheists”, ensured that the Polish Reformed synod condemn the orthodox doctrine of consubstantiality as Sabellian, thus sealing the break-up of the Polish Reformed Church (Taplin, *The Italian Reformers*, 187; on the anti-Sabellian tendencies of the followers of the Italian antitrinitarian leader Giorgio Biandrata in Poland, see also 186). Aconcio’s polemic against Sabellianism may well also be linked to the controversy which had taken place, in the early 1560s, between the Italian Antitrinitarians and another heterodox exile, Francesco Stancaro, whose views were often polemically linked to Sabellianism (ibid., 179, 196, 211). Finally, it is worth noting that Ochino had dismissed the Sabellian position in Dialogue XIX of his *Dialogi* (on this point, see Mark Taplin, ‘Ochino, Bullinger and the *Dialogi XXX*’, in *Heinrich Bullinger: Life, Thought, Influence. Zurich, Aug. 25-29, 2004, International Congress Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575)*, 2 vols., eds. E. Campi and P. Opitz (Zurich, 2007), 1: 342).

⁸¹ Dufour, ‘Vers latins’, 111: ‘pium Christi [...] discipulum’.

⁸² See in particular the segments ‘Epitaphium Michaelis Serveti Villanovi Lusitani ad pios Christi fratres loquentis’, ‘In Trinita[tem]’, ‘Servetus’, ‘Ad Genevae ecclesiam’, ‘Ad eandem [Genevam]’, ‘Ad Calvinus’, ‘Dialogus Marphorii et Pasquilli De Serveto combusto Genevae’, ‘Dialogus Genius et Geneva’, and ‘Pasquillus ad Servetum combustum Genevae’, ibid., 109-14.

⁸³ Ibid., 110.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 111.

⁸⁵ Gribaldi, ‘Apologia’, fols. 18r-v, 20r, 21v-22v.

views on both the Trinity and persecution.⁸⁶ This was an account of the relationship between the freedom of dissent and the progress of truth that resonated profoundly with the antitrinitarians' view of their own mission. Twelve years later, the antitrinitarian leaders Giorgio Biandrata and Ferenc Dávid were to adopt very similar terms in their *On the false and true knowledge of the one God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (1568): 'Luther and Zwingli', they wrote, had spent much effort in rejecting 'indulgences, Purgatory, holy water, the Mass, and all other blasphemies, in which eternal life was placed'; it was therefore no wonder 'if we too, who want Christ drawn out from deeper darkness, now attempt greater things, and fight against more henchmen and enemies of the truth, whose weapons are calumnies, insults, offences, sword and fires.'⁸⁷

Their rejection of trinitarian doctrine, in sum, played various roles in the Italian antitrinitarians' critiques of religious coercion. Insofar as all of them made a case for the legitimacy of dissent on the Trinity, albeit with different degrees of explicitness, these critiques can undoubtedly be read as vindications of their authors' own right to free expression. Kamen may thus be right to suggest that the Italian antitrinitarians' calls for freedom of dissent were developed in reaction to a perceived threat against their own position; indeed, though Servetus's death held a particular significance for those whose views could be associated to Servetus's own, the fear it engendered will no doubt also have contributed to the motives of the other Italian radicals who joined the antitrinitarians in defending religious freedom. But the Italians' antitrinitarianism was more than a simple motivating factor. In some cases, it shaped the direction of the arguments they chose to adopt: the distinction between fundamentals and indifferent matters, for instance, could lend itself particularly well to the purposes of those who wanted to defend the freedom to question the Trinity, much as it was not unique to their anti-coercionist works.⁸⁸ In other cases, it was expressly entwined with their account of the progression of truth, and therefore of the need for free dissent in order to allow this truth to be made manifest. It makes little sense, then, to ask whether the Italians defended free enquiry because they were antitrinitarian, or whether they arrived at their antitrinitarianism through a

⁸⁶ Ibid., fols. 22v-23r.

⁸⁷ Giorgio Biandrata and Ferenc Dávid, *De falsa et vera unius dei patris, filii et spiritus sancti cognitione libri duo (Albae Iuliae) 1568*, intr. Antal Pirnát (Budapest, 1988), 27: 'Luthero, & Zuinglio'; 'indulgentias, purgatorium, aquam lustralem, Missam, & ceteras blasphemias, in quibus vita aeterna locabatur.' & nobis quoque nunc maiora experiunda sunt, qui ex densioribus tenebris Christum erutum cupimus, & aduersus plures satellites, ac veritatis hostes pugnamus, quorum arma calumniæ, conuitia, maledicta, ferrum & ignes sunt'.

⁸⁸ This distinction had been among the most controversial arguments in Castellio's *De haereticis* (see in particular the pseudonymous preface by 'Martinus Bellius', *De haereticis*, 3-12, 20, 23-26; cf. also 141), and regularly occurs in his later writings and in those of his followers.

commitment to free enquiry: in their own eyes, the right to dissent was both a personal necessity and a fundamental feature of the advancement towards truth in all matters. It just so happened that this truth left no room for belief in the Trinity itself.

V. Conclusion

As early as the 1960s, Antonio Rotondò warned against the flattening of distinctions between the positions of the sixteenth-century heterodox Italian exiles that vitiated scholarly accounts of the development of antitrinitarian doctrine: the views on the Trinity espoused by Biandrata or Ochino, he cautioned, should not be conflated with those of Lelio Sozzini and his followers.⁸⁹ A similar point may be made in relation to the Italian antitrinitarians' approach to religious dissent: their common ideological matrix should not make us lose sight of the specificities in the positions of each. Not all antitrinitarians, as we've seen, argued for freedom of expression from similar premises: belief in the value of reason, for instance, was not a necessary feature of the antitrinitarian approach to religious freedom. Not all of them gave equal weight to the Trinity in their discussions of the legitimacy of dissent; the extent to which they did depended in part on the specific character and intended audience of each text. Their very view of the Protestant Churches to which they addressed their writings was not univocal,⁹⁰ even as all of them appealed to a shared 'Evangelical' identity that implied a community of intent between themselves and their trinitarian adversaries. The Protestants' common commitment to rejecting the corruptions brought about by Roman Catholicism and to restoring doctrinal purity was mobilised by the Italians as a means to transcend disagreement over the dogma that above all distanced them from Protestant orthodoxy; there is no sign here, as yet, of a sense of belonging to a new movement with a wholly independent identity. However much we may speak of their approach to dissent as 'antitrinitarian', then, we can be sure that their own aim was to formulate an account of the legitimacy of dissent that held a much wider appeal. The relationship between antitrinitarianism and dissent, in short, was certainly close; but it was also far more complex than we might at first assume.

⁸⁹ Rotondò, 'Calvino e gli antitrinitari italiani', 297-321; cf. 'Sulla diffusione clandestina delle dottrine di Lelio Sozzini (1560-1568)' [1974], in *Studi di storia ereticale*, 1: 323-47.

⁹⁰ Aconcio spoke to his adversaries as to brothers in need of admonishment, and clearly identified with the cause of Protestantism, though embracing a very loose notion of what "Protestantism" meant: for just a few examples, see Aconcio, *Stratagematum Satanae libri VIII*, 6-8, 326-28, 582-84. Ochino, on the other hand, distanced himself far more radically from the Churches he attacked: see for instance Dialogue XXVII, which presents a scathing critique of the Reformed Churches' claims to represent the true Church (*Dialogi XXX*, 329-77).

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