

Vermigli, Sozzini and the Italian circle in Zurich

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Zurich became, in the second half of the 1550s, the main Swiss centre of Italian Protestant learning outside Geneva and Basel. Pietro Martire Vermigli, born in Florence in 1499, had been prior of the Augustinian canons of San Frediano in Lucca from May 1541 and had fled Italy in 1542, when the Inquisition was reorganized. He taught for five years at the College of St Thomas in Strasbourg, held the Regius chair of divinity at Oxford from 1547 and returned to Strasbourg after Mary I restored Catholicism in England.¹ In 1556 he accepted a call to Zurich as successor of Konrad Pellikan, the same scholar who had advised Beccaria in the early 1540s, and taught there until his death on 12 November 1562.² His *Loci communes*, compiled from his writings and published in 1576, became one of the most widely used works of Reformed theology of the later sixteenth century.

The Italian circle in Zurich thus included, in the years after 1555, a former vicar general of the Capuchins, a former Augustinian prior who was one of the leading theologians of the Reformed world, a jurist's son from Siena with doubts about the doctrine of the Trinity, and the lay elite of Locarno. Its intellectual range was wider than that of the Zurich church as a whole. Its members were in contact with Italians in Geneva, Basel, the Grisons, Poland and Transylvania. That range was a strength for the congregation and a risk for the host city, which was determined to keep its church free of the antitrinitarian ideas that circulated among the Italian exiles.

1 The Dialogi XXX and the expulsion of 1563

The risk materialized in 1563. Ochino published at Basel his *Dialogi XXX*, a collection of thirty dialogues on theological questions, without first submitting the work to the censorship of the Zurich authorities.³ Two of the dialogues gave offence: one on the Trinity, which his critics read as anti-trinitarian, and one on marriage, which appeared to defend polygamy.

Miguel Gotor, the author of the entry in the Italian national biographical dictionary, notes that Ochino presented polygamy as lawful only where a wife was sterile and sickly. The Zurich council expelled him. The historical dictionary describes the charge of anti-trinitarianism as perhaps unfounded.⁴ Ochino, by then in his mid-seventies, left Zurich, went first to Poland and then to Moravia, and died at Austerlitz (Slavkov) between the end of 1564 and the beginning of 1565.

The expulsion of Ochino ended the most prominent phase of the Italian congregation. Vermigli had died in November 1562 and Lelio Sozzini on 14 May of the same year.⁵ The Locarnese families had by then begun the process of economic integration that led some of them, within two or three generations, into the leading circles of the city. The congregation, enlarged by later arrivals from Locarno, continued under other ministers until the end of the sixteenth century, while its leading families were received into the citizenship of Zurich and gradually merged with the city's own elite.⁶

2 What the Ochino affair shows

The Ochino affair is often told as a story of theological intolerance, and it was one. For the legal history of refugee communities it also shows a structural feature that recurs in later periods: a host state that admits a foreign community grants it autonomy only within the limits of its own public order and retains the power to withdraw that autonomy when the community's leaders cross a line that the host defines. The Locarnese had left Locarno because the ruling cantons would not tolerate a Reformed congregation. Eight years later their own pastor was expelled from Zurich because the Reformed council would not tolerate his opinions. Religious freedom in the modern sense, a right of the individual against the state, existed in neither place. What the refugees obtained in Zurich was protection for an orthodoxy, together with the economic opportunities that came with membership in a prosperous city.

3 Notes

1. Chris Castaldo, "Peter Martyr Vermigli: The Forgotten Reformer", Davenant Institute, 19 August 2019, <https://davenantinstitute.org/vermigli-forgotten-reformer/> (prior of San Frediano from May 1541, flight in 1542, Strasbourg, Oxford from 1547). Florence as place of birth. ↩
2. Castaldo, "Peter Martyr Vermigli" (above) (Zurich from 1556 as successor of Conrad Pellican; died 12 November 1562); "Vermigli,

Pietro Martire", The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed., via Encyclopedia.com,
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/philosophy-and-religion/protestant-christianity-biographies/pietro-martire-vermigli> (professor at Zurich from 1556 until his death). ↩

3. Gotor, "Ochino, Bernardino" (above) (publication at Basel without prior authorization of the Zurich council; "liceità, soltanto quando una donna fosse sterile e malaticcia"; "Morì ad Austerlitz in un giorno imprecisato tra la fine del 1564 e l'inizio del 1565"); Campi, "Ochino, Bernardino" (above) (Poland, then Moravia). Date of the expulsion decision (late November or early December 1563). ↩
4. Campi, "Ochino, Bernardino" (above) ("con l'accusa - forse infondata - di antitrinitarismo"). ↩
5. Castaldo, "Peter Martyr Vermigli" (above); Biagioni, "Sozzini, Lelio" (above) ("La morte sopraggiunse il 14 maggio 1562 all'età di trentasette anni"). ↩
6. Schaff, History of the Christian Church, vol. VIII, § 40 (above) ("The Italian congregation was enlarged by new fugitives from Locarno and continued to the end of the sixteenth century"; "The principal families of Duno, Muralto, Orelli, Pestalozzi, and others were received into citizenship, took a prominent position in the history of Zürich"). The later history of the Italian congregation is treated in Chapter B.II. ↩

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