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Michael M. Tavuzzi. *Renaissance Inquisitors: Dominican Inquisitors and Inquisitorial Districts in Northern Italy, 1474-1527.* Studies in the History of Christian Traditions. Leiden: Brill, 2007. xiii + 286 pp. \$148.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-16094-1.

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Guardians of Orthodoxy

Who would line up to be an inquisitor? What might the motivation be? How were they regarded by others in the Dominican order, or by the church as a whole, or by the laity? What relationship is there between reform zeal and inquisitorial rigor, between “professionalism” and severity? And how does a historian write about such an office, knowing what we now know? Michael Tavuzzi’s book suggests that he is meticulous; his work reminds one not a little of nineteenth-century German positivism at its best, close to the sources, reveling in detail, cautious of making large generalizations. He made his name with a biography of Luther’s early opponent, Silvester Prierias.[1] He writes ascetically, with his own take on the topic seldom evident. Even so, the book is lucidly, even colorfully written. It corrects much less stringent scholarship, and thus will be invaluable as a reference tool in the future.

The two appendices, a biographical register of Dominican inquisitors in northern Italy from 1474 to 1527, and the calendar of trials for witchcraft by Dominican inquisitors for the period 1450-1527, are very useful. The starting point for the study is the availability of registers from 1474; 1527 marks the sack of Rome, the growing threat of Lutheranism in North Italy, and, soon after, the emergence of imperial legislation against heresy at the 1529 Diet of Speyer. The whole book makes a good case that the Roman Inquisition as it emerged in 1542 sprang from solid precedents.

The first part of the book offers a reliable, textbook-like introduction to the infrastructure, so to speak, of the Dominican inquisitions in North Italy, outlining districts covered, procedure for appointments of inquisitors, and the difference between the conventual provinces and the observant congregations. This is the place to come for readers who want to know about the role of inquisitorial vicars, lay auxiliaries, the buildings for “inquisitorial pursuits” (p. 31), and their archives and handbooks. In the section on the profile of the inquisitor, Tavuzzi is realistic about the impossibility finding of anything approaching a window into their souls, given the “almost complete lack of personal, intimate documentation” (p. 38). Inquisitors were generally senior members of the order, with considerable experience as teachers or priors, spiritual directors, administrators, or mediators. The *studium generale* of Bologna, with its fine library, for example, could be seen as the principal nursery of future inquisitors in Renaissance Italy, and indeed right up to the late eighteenth century. Inquisitors could be interested in humanism, not least in its Platonic form, and shared its fascination with the occult. The hackneyed image of the obscurantist inquisitor has limited relevance to the North Italian scene. Paulo Maneglia da Genova’s disinclination to condemn Pico della Mirandola’s *Conclusiones* in 1493 is typical. The inquisitors were certainly a cut above the normal friar; Tavuzzi reminds us that the friaries were riddled with rivalries and antagonisms, and that alongside the learned and the saintly were “poltroons and in-

corrigible culprits: thieves, lechers, syphilitics" (p. 44).

The second chapter deals with the impact of the Dominican reform moment in the late fourteenth century and the consequent tension between the convent and observant wings, the latter often promoted by secular powers. In 1459, Pius II set up the Observant Congregation of Lombardy. Although the convent enjoyed more personal liberties, both groups had their share of saints and rogues. The intensification of inquisitorial activity as a result of the transfer of responsibility to the observant is, however, unmistakable. Often the office had been regarded in the past as a largely honorary one, the mark of a successful career in the order. The activities of six inquisitors, some conventuals, and some observants are described, though a recurring note is the absence of detailed information about the trials they conducted. The archives of the Ferrara inquisition, for example, have been lost completely. So the pickings can be quite lean, despite the intense research conducted.

Chapter 3, appropriately titled "Administrators, Courtiers, Academics," reviews various "desultory" inquisitors, such as Giovanni Rafanelli da Ferrara, the inquisitor of Ferrara and Modena for three decades, who leaned heavily on the support of the Este family. An interesting sidelight is that the attitude to court "beati," such as Lucia da Narni, whose stigmata were repeatedly subjected to examination, was not so negative as might perhaps be expected. The thematic chapters 4 and 5, on minorities and witches, constitute the most interesting part of the book. As Tavuzzi points out, "Renaissance Italy was not a land of heretics" (p. 119). In relative terms, too, it was not too hard on Jews, though *conversos* from Spain, who were often suspected of reverting to Judaism, attracted close inquisitorial attention. Several hundred suspects, however, got away lightly with a ritual humiliation at an imposing *auto da fe* in St Peter's Square in 1498 in Alexander VI's time. Secular rulers such as Iolanda of Savoy keenly abetted the campaign against the Waldensians. Biagio Berra, inquisitor of Mondovi for more than forty years after 1471, pursued the Waldensians, who were said to be "pullulating" in Val Lucerna, and this campaign precipitated the Waldensian rebellion in 1483, during which Biagio's house was burned to the ground. Even in his eighties, as Tavuzzi notes in a rare personal comment, Biagio was still "capable of mischief," condemning nine women as witches in 1512-13 (p. 129). Angelo Rizzardi's sixteenth-century *Errori Valdensesium*, based on his experiences in the village of Paesana in the Po valley in 1509-10, where several Waldensians were interrogated and burned to death, remains an invaluable

source for their beliefs at the time.

Toward the end of the book, Tavuzzi tends to abandon his previous restraint, and offers some contestable conclusions. The witch hunt, he suggests, may have been aimed at a real, if shadowy cult in the mountain valleys. Arguments for this view include the prevalence of infanticide, widespread desecration of the Host, and the frequency with which the phrase "you are lying in your throat" (the alleged witch's response to the priest's proclamation of the body of Christ in the mass) recurs in the transcripts of witch trials. Tavuzzi also cautions against the thesis that the various components of the accusation of diabolic worship, such as flying through the air, attendance at Sabbaths, and so on, had an overwhelmingly learned rather than popular origin.[2]

The brutality and intensity of the pursuit of witches in northern Italy may, he suggests, reflect the conviction of the inquisitors that an "extremely dangerous, conspiratorial sect of heretics" (p. 150) was involved. The campaign of inquisitors such as Constantini, Soleri, and Pezzotelli certainly preceded the appearance of Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger's *Malleus maleficarum* in 1487, so their diabolic interpretation of witches appears to be based on the experience of inquisitors in the northern districts of Savoy; it was well established by the 1460s. Tavuzzi underlines the importance of the exchange of experiences between inquisitors. Considerable coverage is given to the career of Niccolo Constantini da Biella, inquisitor of Vercelli, Ivrea, Novara, and Como, around 1460-83, whose activities provoked popular rage, a quite widely documented reaction to inquisitorial activism, but had the support of the Sforzas. The surrealist world of zealous Bologna inquisitor Domenico Pirri, much loved for his sweet nature and fine preaching, is portrayed. Most bizarre, perhaps, is the material on Girolamo da Lodi, inquisitor of Brescia, 1518-26, who presided over the great witch hunts in Valcamonica, north of Brescia, which were characterized by extreme cruelty, the very large numbers of witches burned, and angry reactions from the local peasantry. The disapproval of the Venetian government is noted.

Though Tavuzzi emphasizes the use of torture and the likely role of financial gain in some of these witch hunts, he also stresses the procedural correctness of most of the trials, and argues that the increasing severity of persecution by observant inquisitors was due less to ideological reasons than to their greater mobility and "professionalism," compared with the conventuals. All of this material coheres with his emphasis on the popular genesis

of the witch hunts and the suggestion that an actual cult of some kind existed. A surprising number of misprints are found in the book, and the absence of any maps is a real handicap, since many of the localities referred to are quite obscure and will be unfamiliar, even to specialists. Even so, it is a fine book that inclines at least one reader to think that a rather decadent church may at times be the preferred option.

Notes

[1]. Silvester Prierias, *The Life and Works of Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, 1456-1527* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977).

[2]. As argued recently by Jonathan B. Durrant, *Witchcraft, Gender and Society in Early Modern Germany* (Boston: Brill, 2007).

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