

Article

# Unbelief and Inquisition in Early Modern Italy: The Case of Flaminio Fabrizi

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**Abstract:** This essay reflects on the history of the origins of atheism in the late sixteenth century through an analysis of the Inquisition proceedings against Flaminio Fabrizi, which began in Siena in 1587 and ended in Rome in 1591 with the accused being sentenced to death at the stake. This is a very intriguing case because Fabrizi, not a learned man, mixed different forms of heterodoxy and unbelief that surprised and disturbed the judges of the Holy Office. This essay aims to contribute to the history of religious nonconformism in Counter-reformation Italy and in Europe during the so-called “confessional era”.

**Keywords:** unbelief; atheism; libertinism; Averroism; Roman Inquisition; early modern Siena; Counter-reformation of Italy; astrology; divination; Jewish–Christian relations

## 1. Introduction

This is the story of a trial set up in the city of Siena towards the end of the 16th century by the Roman Inquisition, which led to the burning at the stake of an ordinary layman accused of voicing some serious heresies. Before 1998, it was thought that the records of the Siena Holy Office (one of the Roman Inquisition’s forty or so judicial districts, of which three were in Tuscany) had been lost. However, when the archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith were opened to the public as part of the year 2000 Jubilee celebrations, scholars found—in with the other documentation—a huge collection of trials, letters and registries that had been shipped to the Vatican after the suppression of the Siena tribunal (Di Simplicio 2005, 2012). There are very few local Inquisition archives in Italy that survive in anything approaching their entirety, and that alone would make the Siena archive—which lacks only the earliest years, 1542 to 1580—a remarkable holding. The cases pursued in the city seem to have been numerous, and one of the most controversial of them involved a couple of relatively young men who had discussed religion in too heterodox a manner, both privately and publicly. Following the second phase of the trial, transferred to Rome, the principal defendant, Flaminio Fabrizi, was condemned to death on a number of counts, among which that of being an “atheist” catches the eye.<sup>1</sup>

The question raised by these documents is one that has occupied the minds of historians of Christianity in the late medieval and early modern periods for more than seventy years: was atheism as such conceivable in the sixteenth century, or was Lucien Febvre correct in his thesis outlined in the classic *Le problème de l’incroyance au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. La religion de Rabelais?* In 1942 Febvre, as we know, had argued that before the later modern period atheism had not existed, because it was literally inconceivable, as being incompatible with the “mentality” of the time—or occurred only in very exceptional cases. According to the famous French historian, notwithstanding a few reported episodes of unbelief, of satire or criticism of official religion, you could not be anything but a Christian in European society, even after the upheavals of the Reformation (Febvre 1982). Subsequent research has modified, even contradicted, his claim in a debate that warmed up considerably after the delayed English translation appeared. It is sufficient here to mention an article (Wootton



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1988), or an essay collection that looks at the Italian situation, coming out, incidentally, against Febvre («Certainly, in early modern Italy all the arguments necessary for a fully developed atheism were put into circulation by believers», Davidson 1992, p. 59). For the Middle Ages, some scholars (Minois 1998; Arnold 2005) have highlighted how, as far back as the thirteenth century, theologians and inquisitors had occasion to condemn men and women and doctrines denying transubstantiation and miracles or mocking the clergy and the sacrament. A particular mystery is the circulation of the idea that Moses, Muhammad and Christ were three imposters and religion a mere human invention. This view was even attributed to the Emperor Frederick II, who was in conflict at the time with the papacy but who responded robustly to the charge, as can be seen from a letter from his chancellor Pietro della Vigna. But the existence of a book entitled *De tribus impostoribus* in the Middle Ages or even the sixteenth century, that is, before the publication of two distinct versions in the eighteenth century, is far from confirmed: the question of its being anything but a late spoof remains unresolved (Ernst 2008; Minois 2012). And then, Boccaccio, no less, included in his *Decameron* the story of the Three Rings, which suggested that the three great monotheistic religions all had some indistinguishable degree of truth in them (Shagrir 2019). Of considerable importance was also the spread of Averroes' writings, which, in the name of dual truths (the truth of reason and the truth of faith), used Aristotle to deny that the immortality of the soul (and consequently eternal life) could be proven philosophically (see recently Akasoy and Giglioni 2013; Matula 2020). In this context, the possible influence of an Islamic tradition of unbelief on the Christian world has been posited as contributing to the idea of the three imposters (Massignon 1920; Marcolini 2003). Finally, in recent years the Iberian Peninsula—where up until the end of the fifteenth century Jews, Muslims and Christians (new and old) still cohabited—has increasingly seemed a promising terrain for studying the spread of early forms of atheism, or at least of religious indifference, not only at the philosophical level, but also in rural villages. A key text here is an article by Edwards, immediately criticised from a Febvrian standpoint (Edwards 1988, 1990; Sommerville 1990). As for the Italian peninsula, many studies have insisted on the humanist circles most inclined to Epicureanism and the cult of the pagan world, trying to establish a link between the unbelief spread as early as the 15th century and the subsequent elaboration of anti-Christian positions in Niccolò Machiavelli (see Conti 2017).<sup>2</sup>

For many of the contributors to the debate, the first problem is to define the phenomenon under discussion: are we talking about atheism, unbelief or religious scepticism? In a relevant work, Stuart Schwartz argued that the history of doubt and tolerance can be outlined in quite a traditional manner, tracing its path from Valla or Erasmus to Voltaire, by way of the “Scientific revolution”; or from a more “ground-level” perspective, focusing on a practical ability to “rub along together”, which persisted in the Old and the New Worlds despite the mass Iberian expulsions of Jews and Moriscos and the confessional schism in Europe. The heretical notion that “everyone can find salvation in their own way”, regardless of their convictions, of whether or not they were baptised, or were Jews or Muslims, schismatics or heretics, pagans or idolaters met with outside Europe through the processes of colonial expansion, was an idea that we come across in numerous Inquisitorial trials conducted in Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Brazil and India. He concludes that in the early modern period certain forms of unbelief and indifference derived not so much from the medieval panoply of minority theological doctrines as from a mindset that developed during the sixteenth century, and had its roots in the weak Christian identity of the Marranos and more-or-less forcefully converted Muslims; in the minds of barely catechised Indians; in the attitudes of old Christians at a time when the disciplining of the speech and behaviour of the faithful on both sides of the divide was trying to force apart those who insisted on getting along in defiance of efforts to bolster religious hatred. Menocchio the miller, who has achieved a certain renown thanks to Ginzburg's burrowing in the Roman Inquisition records, provides a good example. Tried at the end of the sixteenth century, he defended in front of his judges a form of popular indifferentism partly derived from his reading of Boccaccio (Ginzburg 1982)<sup>3</sup>. In any case, in his desire to understand

the genesis of modern Atlantic pluri-confessionalism and to trace the reception of the latitudinarian notion that “everyone can find their own salvation”, Schwartz highlights the importance of investigating the contexts in which Christians came into contact with other religions—whether in Spain and Portugal, commercial networks, centres of the Sephardic diaspora, the ports through which apostates captured by corsairs passed, the New World and the colonies. Inquisitorial sources, he writes, allow us to hear the voices of “dissidents” about whom we would otherwise not have known (Schwartz 2008). A similar line has been followed by some scholars who has shown also how some forms of unbelief, originating in the Iberian Peninsula from Jewish and Islamic circles, crossed over into Italy, where before the 16th century the Spaniards had enjoyed a reputation as antitrinitarians rather than actual unbelievers (García-Arenal and Pastore 2019).

In the early modern period in Italy, with the exception of the Waldensians, there were no forced baptisms or mass expulsions, the Jews were a small minority and there were hardly any Muslims. None the less, the fairly widespread humanist interest in ancient paganism, the circulation of the first hermetic and Platonic texts in Latin translation and, above all, a resurgence of Aristotelian Averroism in the universities of Padua and Bologna, led by the philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1525), who taught at both academies, put the Roman Church in a state of alarm prior to the Council of Trent.<sup>4</sup> In his lectures and some of his writings such as his treatise *De incantationibus* (that circulated in manuscript after 1520, before being printed posthumously in 1556),<sup>5</sup> Pomponazzi voiced doubts concerning the immortality of the soul, the existence of devils and miracles, hinting (like his contemporary Machiavelli) that religion was a man-made fabrication.<sup>6</sup> In short, as Davidson has suggested, all the necessary ingredients were present in early sixteenth century Italy to bake a fine serving of unbelief. Calvin went so far as to describe the peninsula in the 1540s as a home to nonbelievers and libertines. Not that this applied only to Italy, evidently: in common with the Catholic inquisitors, he was alarmed by the antitrinitarian and radical doctrines sweeping Europe.

What exactly he meant is, even today, the subject of debate—what was conveyed by the term “libertine” in the sixteenth century, before it came to denote, in the seventeenth, an intellectual who concealed his elite scepticism and heterodox opinions from the censors? When René Pintard published his study of French *libertinage érudit* in 1943, focusing on figures such as the bibliophile Gabriel Naudé, he proposed that the seventeenth-century unbelievers harked back to an Italian sixteenth-century tradition that embraced those such as Pomponazzi, Machiavelli, the philosopher Girolamo Cardano and, by no means least, the Dominican Tommaso Campanella (Pintard 1983). However, a trend in recent studies has been to set aside this descendance in favour of analysing the history of the rejection of mainstream Christianity on the basis of freedom of the mind, and, at the same time, of the body. According to Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, who has repeatedly discussed the category of libertinism, even the male and female mystical sects of the late medieval/early modern era contributed throughout Europe to the desertion of official religion by spreading the assurance that the “elect” in direct contact with God did not sin if they pursued unorthodox sexual practices. Even if their language remains Christian, Cavaillé argued, the mystics are a vital link in the exploration of the history of freethinking, behavioural heterodoxy and eventually atheism (Cavaillé 2007, 2008, 2013). Then again, for Luca Addante, the presence in Naples of the Spanish *alumbrado* Juan de Valdés was not only of particular significance for the orientation of reform in Italy (which was neither Lutheran, nor Calvinist, nor Erasmian) but also contributed to the radicalisation of a number of heretics who came to adopt quasi-atheist positions (Addante 2010). It would take too long, here and now, to detail why I myself do not agree with these theories, and I will confine myself to noting that a great number of those studied by Cavaillé and Addante always declared themselves to be—indeed were—sincere Christians. If many of the heretics who met with Valdés were unbelievers, this had less to do with Valdés himself than with their having read Machiavelli and a clutch of humanists enamoured of ancient paganism (and some, besides, had studied at Padua). My basic question is this then: what happened in the early modern period,

between the initial humanist explosion of enthusiasm for astrology, say, and the birth of “libertine” unbelief that encouraged the clandestine circulation of the idea of religion as deception? Can a line of descent be traced? Can this be done, in particular, in Italy, where the sixteenth century saw a revival of Averroism that left a significant mark on the universities? Above all, can the history of unbelief be studied beyond the educated classes, outside the limited circle of theologians, humanists and philosophers, away from the printed word? The fortunate survival of a trial such as the one I am going to talk about briefly now offers an opportunity to throw some light on a body of heretical opinions and “ungodly” phraseology that, arising from a milieu permeated with esoteric reading, had a relatively precise import. The context in which the story unfolds is urban rather than rural, and dissimilar therefore from the Menocchio affair. But I believe that the business of these two young men accused by the Holy Office has an importance of its own, and deserves to be analysed with the same attention as the case of Ginzburg’s miller.

## 2. Siena, 1587–1588

The proceedings in question opened, as so often with the Inquisition, with a denunciation or “spontaneous deposition”. The matter came to light, in fact, shortly after Christmas in 1587: two gentlemen, encouraged by their confessor, reported to the Siena Inquisitor Giuliano Causi (1528–1590) that a young man, well-known in the city, the nobleman Niccolò Amerighi (who came from a military family that had distinguished itself in the defence of Siena before it fell to Florence in 1557),<sup>7</sup> in the course of a dinner in the Palazzo della Signoria (the Palace of Government) had expressed opinions contrary to the true faith. Siena was a city where religious deviancy was anything but an abstract concept: the names of Bernardino Ochino and Aonio Paleario would be enough to remind anybody that a short time ago heresy had so infected the city that the Society of Jesus and the Holy Office had both felt impelled to intervene in defence of orthodoxy. Once the ferocious Pius V (1566–1572) was dead and buried, the heresy hearings scaled down somewhat, but the accession of the unpolitical, music-loving Ferdinando de’ Medici to the Florentine principedom, gave the Inquisitorial tribunals a freer hand: the trial *in absentia* (he was safely in Poland) of Fausto Sozzini, initiated a few weeks after the revelations concerning Amerighi, concluded in 1591 with a capital sentence, like the one we are looking at.<sup>8</sup> In any case, around Christmas 1587, the judge of the faith and friar minor Causi found himself faced with a series of claims that went beyond even the most extreme heresies that had circulated in the city a few years earlier. Amerighi, it appeared, had maintained that the Old Testament was only to be considered a sacred text for the Jews and not for Christians; that the prophets of Israel were all accomplished astrologers or adroit politicians who had made use of false signs and wonders to compel the obedience of the people; that Noah’s flood had not been universal, that his ark could not have contained all the animal species on earth, and that Moses had only pretended to have talked with God and had accomplished apparent miracles through his expertise in natural phenomena (he had crossed the Red Sea, for example, profiting from his knowledge of the tides).<sup>9</sup>

The Inquisitor immediately had the suspect arrested, who obligingly confirmed his accusers’ depositions from his very first interrogations, although denying that he had called on devils or that he believed the stars could overrule free will, as the followers of Pomponazzi claimed. Amerighi was, none the less, curious about the power of the stars, wanted to learn Hebrew, had cast horoscopes, and read a number of books on astrology in the vernacular. He was also persuaded that the stories in the Old Testament (which he had read in Latin) were implausible: how could you believe that Eve had been born from Adam’s rib? In Genesis, which actually contained two contradictory accounts, we also read that God had created male and female together. Who could credit that God would need an ark to repopulate the world? And how could a small ship contain so many species of animal? Or the earth be refilled with men and their wars in such a short space of time after the flood? Or the flood itself be universal?—recent explorations had shown that some kinds of animal were found in India and the Americas, while others only in

certain parts of the world: what had carried them so far afield?<sup>10</sup> “I believed—he said—that our own Christian faith had little to do with the Old Testament”; “I thought that was for the Jewish faith”. How could you give credence to such fairy stories? In the Bible, there are even fathers and brothers who get drunk and commit incest. Such things—he commented—“seemed crazy to me”. The Bible stories were full of falsity, invention and concealed truth: the wise men who had visited the baby Jesus were really gifted astrologers who had foreseen the birth of the Messiah; Moses pretended to have a contact with God, but there were no witnesses to back up his story, and he had previously learned the magic arts in Egypt. Christians, therefore, should believe only the New Testament and contest the beliefs of the Jews with a view to converting them. Amerighi claimed that he thought his views were perfectly orthodox and added that he had discussed them with several theologians and Jesuit fathers, and with two members of the Sienese Jewish community who were convinced that Christ was an imposter. He had told them that the marvels accomplished by Moses were different in kind from the miracles of Jesus—they were more of the order of things drummed up to inculcate fear and political obedience, just as in the case of Muhammad, who had pretended to have talked to the archangel Gabriel “to keep the people in awe”. With Christ’s death—he went on—the Old Testament was superseded. The law of Moses—he pointed out—encouraged vengeance, that of Christ forgiveness; the law of Moses said to hate your enemy, the law of Christ says *diligite inimicos vestros* (“love your enemies”). The Old Testament was little more than a chronicle of distant events, just like the tales of ancient Rome.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, the Inquisitor wanted to get to the root of the things he was hearing and wanted to know with whom the accused had practised astrology, palmistry and oneiromancy. Amerigo cited a few books, including some by a follower of Pomponazzi’s, Girolamo Cardano, who had died some eleven years earlier, suspected of heresy himself. These texts had taught him not to trust miracles or events interpreted as marvellous. Abraham had been on the point of sacrificing Isaac because he was tempted by the devil; Moses’ striking water from the rock was a trick. But who had been his tutor, the judge insisted? And now Amerighi came up with a name of a young Roman, Flaminio Fabrizi, who had been his guest for a long period. He was kept in prison through to the spring of 1588, during which time he was visited by a number of confessors who tried to persuade him to recant and denounce his accomplices. Eventually, Amerighi gave in and became a reluctant informer. He waxed more eloquent about Flaminio, volunteering that he was a man who had lived in Paris, had then stayed with him for a while before moving in with a certain Polonia, a prostitute in thrall to his devilish charm. Flaminio had prophesied the election of a Franciscan pope (i.e., Sixtus V, who became pontiff in 1585); he claimed to be disbelieving of all religions and was prone to satire and blasphemy. He said the Bible was full of “bollocks” (*coglionarie*); that popes commanded obedience by instilling fear of God and the Church; that devils and demonic possession did not exist; that heaven was a very boring place, whereas hell was a riot, full of popes and kings and lively spirits;<sup>12</sup> Christ’s miracles were all magic tricks already exposed by Averroes; the greatest of modern philosophers was the German magician Agrippa von Nettesheim (who had realised, even before Fabrizi had gotten there himself, that women were not inferior to men).<sup>13</sup> What worried the Inquisitor, though, was not just the lack of belief demonstrated by the two men: some of Fabrizi’s opinions were seriously in error concerning the nature of Christ, whom Flaminio held to be a “diaphanous” entity, and whose destiny was governed by the stars, as indeed could be seen from his many contemporary horoscopes (one had been cast by Cardano).<sup>14</sup> Christ—according to him—had died in despair, which was also the opinion of one Salomone, a Jewish friend he had debated religion with, who interpreted the last words of Jesus on the cross in this sense.<sup>15</sup> The earthquake felt in Jerusalem at the moment of Jesus’s expiry was an effect controlled by the stars and had been predicted by experts (in any case, in no way miraculous). The Inquisitor wondered if Fabrizi was himself perhaps an astrologer and an anti-Trinitarian, and his suspicions were confirmed when Amerighi told how his friend had poked fun at Sixtus V’s recent bull against divination

and spells (Coeli et terrae creator, 1586);<sup>16</sup> he also composed burlesques and lampooned the clergy, whom he called the enemies of the learned. Flaminio, according to Amerighi, was an eccentric and rebellious character, who when he was twenty years old and a soldier of the Venetian Republic, had plotted to sell the Isole Tremiti, where he was stationed, to the Turks, and to conclude an alliance with the infidels. The aim of all such stories, Amerighi clarified, was to amaze his listeners with his inside knowledge of the world and its secrets, and to gull the credulous<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. Rome, 1588–1591

The Roman heretic was arrested in April and in prison conveyed to his friend Niccolò that he was less than happy at his betrayal. His trial began the following month, and it was immediately apparent to the Inquisitors that they were faced with a man who made no secret of his insatiable thirst for knowledge and his disinclination to bow to any form of discipline or orthodoxy. Flaminio was only too ready to proudly confirm his friend's testimony and admitted he had lived a life of freewheeling wickedness because he was curious about the arts of divination and unable to keep his mouth shut. He had learnt Hebrew—he claimed—and disbelieved in miracles and the authority of the Church; he had already been prosecuted for necromancy in his native city, Rome, from which he had been banished in 1579. On hearing that a woman in Siena had been exorcised, he had declared that demons were not spirits capable of possessing human bodies and attributed the woman's convulsions to melancholia. Flaminio doubted that there was an afterlife, that Mary was a virgin, that the world had been created in Adam's time, and the God was the sole principle of good and evil. He thought rather that there could be two gods (*dua Dij*), one representing the principle of good, the other of evil. He said he had travelled a lot (he had been in Germany and in Paris, apart from the seas he had crossed as a mercenary) and had settled for some time in Siena, where he had gathered around himself a circle of gentlemen (and perhaps the odd priest) interested in astrology.<sup>18</sup> One of his friends was the Marchese Antonio Maria Malaspina, who had attempted to construct, together with himself, some spells *ad amorem*. The two men had joked together about the worship of saints and Christ's miracles, they had laughed over some pasquinades directed at the Spanish cardinals accused of Marranism and had concocted new laws for the secular authorities limiting legacies to the Church and the powers of the Holy Office (*Detto Santo Officio [è] stato causa della perdita di molti regni*). Flaminio also stated that he had read many books on the occult sciences and astrology and claimed to have taken an interest in Paracelsus's medical practices.<sup>19</sup> But his idol was Cardano, whose "lifestyle" Fabrizio may have attempted to imitate. The accused said, in fact, that he was in the habit of going about the city all but naked in the winter (*per la neve nudo*), and wrapped up in the summer, "to make others believe he could subdue the elements" (*fare credere ad altri che lui dominava gl'elementi*). Fabrizio mentioned neither Pomponazzi's nor Machiavelli's writings, but some of his ideas on the fakery of religions could well have derived from those authors.<sup>20</sup> However that may be, the noble Amerighi, who had shopped his nomadic and impoverished friend, got off with the lightest of punishments, publicly forswearing some forty charges, being confined to house arrest and being ordered to pay a fine of two hundred *scudi* (the latter two penalties being commuted shortly afterwards by the judges).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the answers he gave to the inquisitor suggest that Amerighi did not go so far as to consider Christ an impostor. His word, as he repeatedly said, was so true as to render the Old Testament useless. In the process, Flaminio appeared—and perhaps was—far more radical than his pupil. Thus, for Fabrizio, the Siennese stage of his trial (the only one for which we have the interrogations) was only the first in an extended tragedy, which would conclude with his death sentence.

The Congregation of the Holy Office had asked for the trial to be transferred to Rome, in part because Flaminio, born in a small house on the banks of the Tiber, could be considered a relapsed heretic. Thus, the Siena Inquisitor, on the 17th and 18th June 1588, drew up a summary of the case, which included an appendix of eighty separate charges. At the head of them was anti-Trinitarian heresy, but this was followed by a number of opinions

expressed during the interrogations: that “the stars can create a prophet”; that “this world is eternal”; that canon law was not binding on the individual conscience; that animal spirits lurked in the mines, as Paracelsus had claimed; that the demonically possessed were actually suffering from an excess of black bile; that Agrippa von Nettesheim was a great magician; that the civil authorities should not allow the Holy Office any power over their subjects because Inquisitorial justice was invariably harmful to the state.<sup>22</sup>

Fabrizi’s lifestyle provoked the judges almost as much as his opinions. There was a recent precedent in the case of Cardano. The Lombard polymath’s autobiography (*De propria vita*) was only published by Gabriel Naudé in the 17th century, and we cannot know if Fabrizi had heard anything of its contents.<sup>23</sup> Had he been able to read it, he would certainly have recognised something of himself: Cardano had done his utmost to promote his own eccentricity and boost his reputation as an astrologer and an adept of the secrets of nature. As Grafton reports, “In withstanding the pain of serving as the subject in his own public anatomy lesson, he played the hero of science, in his own eyes at least; and the deeper the humiliation he risked, the greater the bravery of his attempt”.<sup>24</sup> In representing the life of the astrologer as a defiance of authority, and in putting on an antinomian and godless front, Fabrizi seems to have taken Cardano as his model, and was certainly an enthusiast of his writings. But his own defence of his beliefs before the judges had little of the heroic. He was no scholar and left no books behind him; he never aspired to the reputation of a Giordano Bruno or a Galileo. We would know nothing at all about him, in fact, if the judges had not recorded his voice for us. During his interrogations, he admitted to fearing martyrdom (*io merito questo e peggio per li miei peccati*), but did little to avoid it.

The Siena dossier soon made its way to Rome. Questioned in prison on 28 July 1588, he was interrogated only once more, on 5 April 1589.<sup>25</sup> We do not know what he said to the cardinals of the Holy Office because we lack the records of the Roman trial, but what is certain is that on 11 October 1589, the Congregation voted on closing his case. The prosecutor (*fiscale*) Anselmo Canuto sought the death penalty, not for apostasy but for an anti-trinitarianism that denied the virginity of the Madonna and came therefore within the remit of a bull of Paul IV (*Cum quorundam hominum pravitas*, published in 1556), which had prescribed burning at the stake for that heresy even as a first offence. He described the defendant as an *atheista*—a rare epithet in the tribunal documents of the time. A number of the counsellors opposed the death penalty, recommending *immuratio* (life imprisonment) instead. Burnings were, by then, actually quite rare in Italy and the judges were sufficiently disturbed by the case to adjourn the trial to a second sitting in the presence of the pontiff.<sup>26</sup> There was a third interrogation, but Flaminio refused to accept the *miser cordia* offered him,<sup>27</sup> and so the tribunal voted again on 29 November. The Holy Office *commissario* Vincenzo Busiatti described Fabrizi as the wickedest of heretics (*scelestissimum*); the Master of the Sacred Palace Vincenzo Bonardi called him a *dogmatista*, one of the counsellors an *infidelis*. Another member of the Congregation, Ascanio Libertani, was more extreme: “I never saw a more wicked and pestilential fellow in my life” (*non vidi hominem pestilentiore et nequitiozem isto in vita mea*). Only the tribunal’s *assessore* Giulio Cesare Salvini was more cautious, suggesting that the Congregation condemn him to rigorous imprisonment. The other members voted unanimously for execution, though leaving the final verdict to pope Sixtus V, who assented.<sup>28</sup>

On 22 December 1589, the condemned man was entrusted to a confessor, but the final opportunity for recantation and an eventual handing over to the secular arm was delayed by the death of the pope.<sup>29</sup> Another year passed, and on 18 December 1590, the cardinals allowed Fabrizi a few more days to retract. When it became clear he would not withdraw what he had said at his trial, the sentence was declared effective.<sup>30</sup> Even then, several more weeks passed, during which a judgement was drafted to be sent to Siena and read in the *piazza* as a warning to others.<sup>31</sup> If we know any further details of the story, it is thanks to this document, a copy of which is held in the archives.<sup>32</sup> From it, we learn that Flaminio was condemned, among other things, for having believed in Cardano’s horoscope of Christ;

for declaring that prophecy was in the gift of the stars; for maintaining that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was due to the sulphurous terrain on which those cities stood, like Pozzuoli in Italy;<sup>33</sup> that life could spontaneously generate from mud. The tribunal did not call him exactly an atheist, but the sentence declared him “a faithless heretic and destroyer of the foundations of the Holy Faith” (*heretico infidele e distruttore delli fundamenti della Santa Fede*).

And so finally, at dawn on 7 February 1591, Flaminio—having, according to a document written by the confraternity that comforted those condemned to death in Rome, repented at the last—was “mercifully” hung before being burned, and his body consumed by the flames in the Campo de’ Fiori, where, nine years later, Giordano Bruno would suffer the same fate.<sup>34</sup> In that square in Rome, there is now a statue commemorating the latter, who came to be celebrated in the 19th century as a “martyr for free thought”. But there is no memorial to Fabrizi, who was not a learned man. His trial was none the less a foretaste of those shortly to follow, not only of Bruno, but also of Menocchio and of Tommaso Campanella, although the last survived to die in his bed.

#### 4. Conclusions: An Isolated Case?

The Flaminio affair, then, deserves to take its place in this company. The survival, besides, of the trial documentation does throw light on a range of heretical deviations and impious phraseology that had a clearly defined meaning at the time, and represented more widely diffused ideas than we might think. To realise how far from being out on a limb many of Fabrizi’s opinions were, it is worth noting that the idea that the flood was not universal might as easily come from the mouth of Bruno, and that in that philosopher’s trial—one of the best-known and most important in the history of the Holy Office—several of the charges were identical to those brought against Fabrizi. Both, for example, believed in the existence of pre-Adamic peoples, Fabrizi stating that he had discussed the matter with his Jewish friend Salomone.<sup>35</sup> But the other trial that bears comparison with Fabrizi’s is the first prosecution of Campanella, which took place in Naples in 1599. Campanella, accused later of the authorship of *De tribus impostoribus*, was also arraigned for maintaining that devils had been invented solely in order to instil fear; that Mary was not a virgin; that the Trinity was an unbelievable construct; that the Biblical miracles were not well attested; that Moses had gotten across the Red Sea because he was aware of the tidal cycle; that the wondrous signs accompanying the death of Christ were natural phenomena; that the sacred mysteries were convenient to the State; that Christ and the prophets were imposters; that thanks to studying the stars—which could influence the course of history—prophecy was possible; that life could be spontaneously self-generated; that Adam and Eve were not the first man and woman.<sup>36</sup> Campanella, like Amerighi and Fabrizi, had read Cardano and the other astrological writers cited in Siena. And finally, given that some of Pomponazzi’s pupils had gone on to teach in Tuscany, contact with Averroism was by no means to be excluded. One of Pomponazzi’s followers, Girolamo Borri from Arezzo, yet another putative author of the *De tribus*, repeatedly indicted for heresy, had also helped circulate the writings of Agrippa in Italy and had himself written a treatise *Del flusso e reflusso del mare* (last edition: 1587), which Fabrizi may have known.<sup>37</sup> He had insinuated that miracles might not have been what they seemed, and was maybe a frequenter of some of the walk-on characters in the Siena trial, such as the Marquis Malaspina and his circle in Mulazzo (Montaigne also mentions Borri rather obliquely).<sup>38</sup> Campanella, furthermore, claimed to have seen a copy of the legendary *Three Impostors* in his Inquisition prison. Then again (as Davidson and Berriot, among others, have noted), the 1580s was quite a turning point in so far as more and more heresy trials, both in Italy and elsewhere, began to throw up opinions such as those that led Fabrizi to the stake and Campanella to prison.<sup>39</sup>

Even so, a trial as rich in material as ours is still a rarity, at least before the 17th century. This story, with its unhappy ending, shows that unbelief could exist even in the century of the Reformation, and its breeding ground was a culture conditioned by Averroism, by humanism, by contact with Jewish communities and above all by veneration



of the stars as an alternative to Christianity (a point insisted on by [Mothu 2010](#)). All in all, Fabrizio's story—the story of a man who was not part of the high culture of Aristotelian scholarship, nor the popular culture of Menocchio, nor from the spiritual milieu of Juan de Valdés—offers a contribution to writing “from below” the history of the idea that the monotheistic faiths were fraudulent, and has something to say, if not quite about atheism, at least about unbelief.

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## Notes

- 1 The process has been reported more or less briefly in several studies: ([Di Simplicio 2005](#), pp. 72–74; [Prosperi 2005](#), p. 28; [Lavenia 2010](#); [Frajese 2016](#)).
- 2 For the critique of religion through the figure of Momus, I will only quote ([McClure 2018](#)).
- 3 By indifferentism is meant here of course the opinion that differences of religion are of little importance.
- 4 For an overview see at least ([Copenhaver 2015](#); [Del Soldato 2020](#)).
- 5 See the introduction by Vittoria Perrone Compagni in ([Pomponazzi 2011](#)).
- 6 In the extensive bibliography on the fortune of the writings of the philosopher from Mantua, I will limit myself to mentioning ([Zanier 1975](#); [Maclean 2005](#); [Sgarbi 2010](#); [Regnicoli 2011](#)).
- 7 See ([Di Simplicio 1996](#), p. 94; [Cantagalli 1962](#)).
- 8 On religious dissent in 16th century Siena see at least ([Pirri 1963](#); [Marchetti 1970, 1975](#); [Szcucki 2001](#); [Adorni Braccesi 2003](#); [McClure 2010](#); [Lo Re 2014](#)).
- 9 “Quando Mosè passò il Mar Rosso con il popolo d’Israele non fu per miracolo, ma fu per il flusso et refluxo del mare delle sei hore, che naturalmente fluisce et refluisce”, *Trial Amerighi*, 693r-v.
- 10 On the debate about Noah’s ark see ([Browne 2003](#)), which, however, focuses mainly on the 17th century.
- 11 *Trial Amerighi*, 735v–762v, interrogations of 23 and 24 February, 3 and 4 March 1588.
- 12 In the early modern age, this inverted image of the afterlife had a tradition going back to a dream attributed to Machiavelli and reported by the unorthodox Anton Francesco Doni in a letter published in 1544, but also to the *Pasquino* of the Italian exile Celio Secondo Curione. See firstly ([Sasso 1988](#), III, pp. 211–94, IV, pp. 325–60) and above all ([Terracciano 2016](#)).
- 13 Agrippa’s fortune among the Italian heterodox of the 16th century still awaits a comprehensive reconstruction. But see recent studies by Simonetta Adorni Braccesi (at least [Adorni Braccesi 2011](#)). On the ‘libertine’ language of *De nobilitate atque praecellentia foeminei sexus* see also ([Wirth 2003](#); [Perrone Compagni 2006](#)).
- 14 On the Arab-derived theories that made religious changes depend on the influence of the stars and on Cardano’s horoscope of Christ, reported in some paragraphs of the commentary on Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* (II, 5–9), see ([Cardano 2002a](#); [Ernst 1991](#), pp. 191–219).
- 15 In a census of Jewish residents in Siena in 1580, the names of a “Salomone da Tivoli” and a “Guglielmo medico” appear, men with whom Fabrizio may have been in contact: ([Turrini 2008](#), pp. 26, 30–31).
- 16 The text of the bull in ([Eymericus 1587](#)), *Litterae apostolicae*, pp. 142–44. The Pope also denounced the danger that the practice of astrological and divinatory sciences would threaten religion and lead to unbelief (*periculo erroris et infidelitatis*). On the importance of this document see at least ([Romeo 1990](#); [Zambelli 1996](#), p. 175; [Prosperi 1996](#), pp. 336–67).
- 17 *Trial Amerighi*, 763r–778v, interrogations of 7, 8, 9 March 1588.
- 18 For magic and astrology in Siena see ([Bussagli 1991](#); [Ceppari Ridolfi 1999](#); [Turrini 2003](#)). In the same years as the trial analysed here, a series of enquiries by the Inquisition of Siena highlighted the extent to which astrological knowledge and practice were widespread in the city; furthermore, Fabrizio’s name also appeared in other trials, such as the contemporary one of Lazzaro Zefferini: ([Tedesco 2021](#)).
- 19 The authors cited by Amerighi and Fabrizio, in addition to Paracelsus and Cardano, include Julius Firmicus Maternus; Oronce Finé (his works were published in Italian in 1587); Francesco Giuntini; Christoph Clavius; Pietro d’Abano; Johann Schöner; Johannes Garceus; Patrizio Tricasso; and Giovanni Antonio Magini. For the fortune of his nativities see ([Casali 2003](#)). Some of the texts Fabrizio claimed to have read (but perhaps only heard of) were included in the Index of Forbidden Books.
- 20 *Trial Fabrizio*, cc. 706r–762v, interrogations of 4 May–14 June 1588.

- 21 *Trial Amerighi*, 854r–858v, 860r–863r.
- 22 *Trial Fabrizi*, 763r–777v.
- 23 See the autobiography: (Cardano 2002b). For the history of its edition cf. (Kristeller 1979; Maclean 1994; Cerbu 1999).
- 24 (Grafton 1999, p. 191).
- 25 ACDF, *Decreta Sancti Officij* 1588, 344r; 1589, 66r.
- 26 ACDF, *Decreta Sancti Officij* 1589, 169v–170r.
- 27 ACDF, *Decreta Sancti Officij* 1589, 173r, 18 October.
- 28 ACDF, *Decreta Sancti Officij* 1589, 193v–195r.
- 29 ACDF, *Decreta Sancti Officij* 1589, 205r.
- 30 ACDF, *Decreta Sancti Officij* 1590, 358v, 360v.
- 31 ACDF, *Decreta Sancti Officij* 1590, 394v, 6 February 1591.
- 32 *Sentence*.
- 33 This charge would suggest that Fabrizi had at least an indirect knowledge of the heretic Simone Porzio's *De conflagratione agri Puteolani* (republished in 1551), on which see (Vasoli 2001; Del Soldato 2010).
- 34 Archivio di Stato di Roma, *San Giovanni Decollato*, 7, reg. 15, 34r–v. The document is reported in (Orano 1904, p. 85). See also (Firpo 1974, p. 322) and footnote.
- 35 See (Firpo 1993, p. 104). Bruno's lost writings also include an *Arca di Noè* (Noah's Ark). The philosopher also mocked the Great Flood and the wonders of Moses in *Spaccio della Bestia trionfante* (The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast, 1584). On the belief in pre-adamites before the 17th century, on a global scale, in 2019 Thomas Gruber organised an important seminar at Villa I Tatti in Florence.
- 36 See (Amabile 1882, pp. 195, 201, 213). Cf. (Frajese 2002).
- 37 In the 1561 edition, Borri's treatise on tides included a discourse *Della perfezzione delle donne*, commissioned by Alberico I Cybo Malaspina—the same lineage as Fabrizi's friend. The text was undoubtedly inspired by *De nobilitate atque praecellentia foeminei sexus* written by Agrippa von Nettesheim. After 1577, the treatise was reprinted together with a *quaestio* dedicated to the phenomenon of the periodic flooding of the Nile. In those pages, quotations from Averroes, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Democritus, Hermes Trismegistus, and Theophrastus could not be counted; and when speaking of Egypt, Borri cast doubt on the biblical miracle of the manna. Certain events, one reads, were not miracles, "even though they might appear so to the ignorant" (*se bene a chiunque non sà la causa loro, paiono miracoli*) (Borri 1587, p. 210).
- 38 Montaigne, *Voyage en Italie*, 14 July 1580; but see also *Essais* (I, 26), where he is portrayed as a perfect peripatetic philosopher. Borri was so unorthodox that he was the subject of numerous enquiries (Gabriel Naudé is said to have described him as a perfect atheist). In a trial from 1582–1583, the Holy Office accused him of denying the immortality of the soul. Borri was saved by Pope Gregory XIII, who allowed him to return to Pisa, where he continued to teach until 1587. The Siense tried to enlist him in their University, but something evidently went wrong. For the history of the trials and censorship of Borri's writings see (Baldini and Spruit 2009, vol. 1, pp. 665–82, 812–54) (see these pages for a bibliography on Borri).
- 39 For France see (Berriot 1978). For Italy (Biasiori, forthcoming). For the cases of Girolamo Garzoni and Alvisio Capuano in (Venice Davidson 1992, pp. 58, 74). For Pomponio Rustici, sentenced to be burnt at the stake in Rome in 1587, (Spini 1983, pp. 35–36). In the 17th century, the cases multiplied: for the Siena and Pisa trials against Girolamo Pinelli, a doctor and astrologer who was a pupil of Magini, (Prosperi 2010); for Venice (Barbierato 2012); for Bologna (Ginzburg 1986).

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