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**Caravale, Giorgio. Forbidden Prayer: Church Censorship and
Devotional Literature in Renaissance Italy. Trans. Peter
Dawson**

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Caravale, Giorgio.

***Forbidden Prayer: Church Censorship and Devotional Literature in Renaissance Italy.* Trans. Peter Dawson.**

Catholic Christendom, 1300–1700. Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. x, 296. ISBN 978-1-4094-2988-3 (hardcover) \$124.95.

In a masterful analysis of the connections between grammar and the theology of grace in Luther and Erasmus, Brian Cummings drew attention to the interpenetration of the spheres of literature and theology in the sixteenth century, keenly observing that in the season of religious Reformations the “priesthood of all believers” was directly connected to “an apostolate of readership” (*The Literary Culture of the Reformation*, Oxford, 2002; p, 42). In *Forbidden Prayer*, Caravale turns an incisive gaze to that very nexus. In Italy of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the kind of interiorized spiritual devotion that had characterized the late medieval period, finding expression in a heterogeneous swath of vernacular religious literature, came under close scrutiny in the light of Protestant and proto-Protestant religious developments that challenged, among other things, the validity of the sacramental system and the primacy of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Rome.

In this context, the matter of how one prayed or one ought to pray took on an almost unprecedented importance, as Adriano Prospero in particular has outlined in recent years. Caravale’s *Forbidden Prayer* contributes greatly to this vibrant scholarly discourse by revealing, in impressive detail, how mental prayer was at the heart of ecclesiastical criticism and censorship, as its enactment came to denote if not outright adherence to Lutheranism then the rather perilous personal choice to favour a private, individual religiosity of mystical inspiration over the ecclesiastically mediated public and collective modes of piety exemplified in vocal prayer. Complementing the work of notable Italian scholars like Prospero, Caravale’s study adds illuminating brush strokes to the canvases of other early modernists specializing in contiguous areas of Reformation research. This is just one of the reasons why Peter Dawson’s translation of Caravale’s Italian edition (Florence, Olschki, 2003) constitutes a formidable addition to the growing number of scholarly publications on the Italian Reformation in English.

Taking mental prayer as a focused topic and a thread for his study, Caravale examines how it was theorized, implemented, and circumscribed in

sixteenth and early-seventeenth century Italy. The trope of prayer permits the author to evaluate not only the development of devotional literature and lay piety or the relationship of ecclesiastical censorship to book production in this period, but also—and more broadly—the concerns of the Church with respect to the Protestant Reformation, the need for internal renewal and reform, and the use of vernacular among the faithful. The result is an erudite diachronic study of spiritual writing, devotional practices, and censorship that highlights the vicissitudes of specific authors and inquisitors in the delicate and ever-shifting terrain of Italian religious life in the decades before and after the Council of Trent.

Forbidden Prayer is divided into three parts comprising four chapters each. This tripartite structure enables the author to devote attention to three discrete moments of the evolution of mental prayer in the liturgy and the economy of devotion: most notably, its expression in vernacular religious literature destined for lay and clerical readership, and the efforts of the Congregations of the Inquisition and the Index to censor related texts and practices, expunging undesirable heterodox elements from religious writings on prayer and promoting a unification and standardization of liturgical and devotional activity that reasserted the primacy of the pope as sole arbiter in matters of piety and that reaffirmed the central importance of the liturgy, the sacramental system and, above all, Roman obedience to spiritual salvation.

Censorship activity of sixteenth-century Italy sought to counter Protestantism and Protestant criticism, on the one hand, and to bring about an internal reform of the Church, on the other. Crucial to both goals was the restoration of pre-Lutheran ecclesiastical traditions in matters of devotion. This meant re-proposing a previously flourishing inward spirituality, but one that encouraged participation in collective ritual and the active life more generally. Initially, Catholic authorities opposed the practice of mental prayer almost solely for its association with Lutheran doctrine. As the menace of Protestantism abated, the Church set about re-appropriating mental prayer, but by altering the devotional-liturgical system such that it became subject to the authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Lutheranism, however, was not the only form of religious heterodoxy present in early modern Italy: local (and longstanding) religious traditions were replete with unorthodoxies—superstitions and apocryphal accretions—that did not necessarily conflict with obedience to Rome.

The Church's aim of creating liturgic uniformity was ultimately thwarted, Caravale argues, not only by the desire of the faithful and their ministers to adhere to local traditions, but also by the opposition of printers, especially those in Venice. Ecclesiastical innovations such as the Decree on Litanies and Prayers (1601) attempted to accommodate local traditions by making a distinction between what was permissible to recite in public versus in private and by allowing laymen to retain forbidden books but not to read them until they had been amended. Congregations and religious orders proved unsurprisingly reluctant to furnish the Congregation of the Index with too many details concerning books in their possession. In time, censorship pressures diminished as inquisitors—bogged down by the sheer copiousness and variety of vernacular texts and by a resultant confusion about what ultimately constituted heterodoxy—began allowing superstitious or apocryphal material to remain in use and in print if it were considered apt at stimulating devotional sentiment in its readers.

Caravale succeeds well in his intended goal of laying bare the machine of censorship by analyzing the activity of Church departments through consideration of their initiatives, directives, prescriptions, and correspondence together with the reception of these by writers, clerics, and laymen. The author has consulted an impressive number of primary sources, many of which are cited within the book. The bibliography is rich and current, replete with works not commonly cited in English language scholarship on the topic, and this is one of its strengths. Its weaknesses are almost negligible in light of the work's global contribution, but one does notice orthographical inconsistencies and typos throughout the text. Sentences are also quite long. As a consequence, Caravale's prose lacks the vigour the original Italian seems to demand. It must be conceded, however, that the subject matter itself is complex and does not lend itself to the simplest of syntactic constructs. On the whole, *Forbidden Prayer* promises to be a fruitful addition to the library of many early modern scholars whatever their stage of career.

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