

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Mazzonis, Querciolo. Riforme di vita cristiana nel Cinquecento italiano.**

James W. Nelson Novoa

Volume 43, Number 4, Fall 2020

Spaces of Power of the Spanish Nobility (1480–1715)  
Les espaces de pouvoir de la noblesse espagnole (1480–1715)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076864ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36421>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)  
2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Nelson Novoa, J. (2020). Review of [Mazzonis, Querciolo. Riforme di vita cristiana nel Cinquecento italiano.] *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(4), 316–318. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36421>

transgenerational disputes shines a light on how different generations privilege or silence topics of inquiry according to their cultural and political contexts. In looking back on Cervantine cultural criticism, we find that there is an unspoken invitation to consider how our current generation of Cervantistas will be evaluated by scholars later in the twenty-first century. In the meantime, we can appreciate the creative and innovative approaches in *Goodbye Eros*, knowing that these erudite essays will surely inspire similarly provocative work in the future.

SHERRY VELASCO

University of Southern California

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36420>

**Mazzonis, Querciolo.**

***Riforme di vita cristiana nel Cinquecento italiano.***

Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2020. Pp. 282. ISBN 978-88-498-6357-4 (paperback) €18.

The new book by Querciolo Mazzonis is aptly entitled *Riforme di vita cristiana nel Cinquecento italiano* as it literally makes a point of demonstrating the manifold strands of reform present in Italian spirituality at the beginning of the sixteenth century, thus combatting the tendency to simplify and reduce the Italian reform movement to just one overarching tendency. Mazzonis has already proved to be a recognized scholar of the Italian preconciliar attempts at reform and female spirituality between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, notably in his previous monograph from 2007 dedicated to Angela Merici, the foundress of the Ursulines: *Spirituality, Gender and the Self in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of St. Ursula (1474–1540)*. His latest book is the culmination of years of work during which he has steeped himself in scholarly literature and source texts. The result is an impressive overview of texts, ideas, individuals, and spiritual currents that span several decades, specifically from 1519 to 1535, a period that saw the birth of several religious orders and groups that were somehow intertwined with the early spread of Protestantism—even though the reformers treated in the book did not fully espouse Protestant ideas.

Mazzonis's book situates us in northern Italy. Whereas much research on early modern Italian scholarship has tended to centre on pivotal figures such as

Juan de Valdés (1509–41) and Bernardino Ochino (1487–1564), exponents of reform with strong *sola fide* tendencies who gained adepts among prestigious members of Italy's Republic of Letters in the first half of the sixteenth century, Mazzonis instead considers three personalities who, though fundamentally important, nonetheless have often been neglected in the scholarly literature: Battista Carioni da Crema (ca. 1460–1534), Angela Merici (ca. 1474–1540), and Girolamo Miani (1486–1537). These three, and the congregations they founded, are often assimilated into a general movement of transformation, renewal, and change in the Italian Peninsula in the sixteenth century; as precursors of the general response to Protestantism, they are often cast as the Counter-Reformation. Mazzonis goes to great lengths to dispel this idea, stressing the distinctiveness of the context and the people studied. Comprising five chapters, the book delves into these individuals and their immediate influence, especially in northern Italy, and considers their lasting importance in the wake of post-Tridentine Catholicism in the second half of the sixteenth century.

The three individuals who provide the backdrop to the study of the reformist currents could not have been more different; a Dominican, a member of the Franciscan third order, and a layman would seem to have been miles apart. However, as Mazzonis shows in the first chapter, in a world of agitation and spiritual flux—which was northern Italy at that crucial juncture—their paths crossed, and they were able to inspire the creation of new religious communities in tune with proposals for radical reform and reinterpretation of the Christian message in the light of a critical reading of the Bible, the church fathers, and the influence of *devotio moderna* and fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanism. In spite of his works being consigned to the Index, Battista da Crema was the inspiration behind the foundation of the Clerics Regular of Saint Paul or the Barnabites; Merici went on to found the Company of St. Ursula, while Miani founded the Congregation of Regular Clerics or Somaschi Fathers. These congregations, inspired by men who were steeped in a critical vision of the church, have stood the test of time and continue to exist today, even though they underwent radical transformations shortly after the deaths of their founders.

In chapters 2 and 3, the author stresses the fundamental importance of the concept of the Christian life—the basis for the ideas elaborated by all three men. While they contributed to the establishment of congregations firmly engaged in active service and charity, the ideas of Christian life as a mastery over the self, union with God, and lives devoted to contemplation and action were essential

to their worldview. All three were thoroughly imbued with a critical reading of classic texts and proposed a purification of the Catholic Church, taking the early church as their model, and were heavily influenced by apocalyptic religious texts penned from the second half of the fourteenth century onwards. Mazzonis traces their influences and precursors in order to study the contexts in which they produced their writings and inspired the birth of their communities.

Particularly interesting is how the congregations changed and were transformed. In chapters 4 and 5, he shows how the growth in their ranks, Inquisitorial repression, the spread of Protestantism, and post-Tridentine Catholicism also provoked a revisitation of the original charism and religious practice. The censorship of Battista da Crema meant that the very congregation inspired by him had to prohibit the reading of his work—even though, as Mazzonis shows, there are subtle yet convincing signs of his influence on the religiosity of Luis de Granada (1504–88), Philip Neri (1515–95), Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491–56), and especially Charles Borromeo (1538–84). The Ursulines had change imposed on their original charism by Borromeo, submitting them to a new rule under the direction of spiritual fathers, while the Somaschi fathers merged for a brief period with the Theatines, under the man who is often evoked as the great enemy of this spiritual current, Gian Pietro Carafa (1476–1559), later Pope Paul IV (1555–59), who was also instrumental in distancing the Theatines from the reformist currents prevalent in northern Italy.

Mazzonis's book is a welcome addition to the current and ever-growing literature regarding spirituality in early modern Italy. It is a work of careful rereading and reconsideration in which texts are considered anew and their contexts and sources are given a fresh interpretation. Dispelling facile simplifications and overarching narratives, his is a study in subtlety—much needed and certain to be appreciated. It will contribute to a host of academic debates and to the work on Italian Protestantism, confessionalization, Tridentine Catholicism, and the creation and transformation of early modern religious congregations and orders. Erudite and engaging, it provides readers with a detailed and gripping portrait of some of the key actors involved in this early movement of Italian reform whom scholarship has until now largely ignored.

JAMES W. NELSON NOVOA

University of Ottawa

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i4.36421>