

MENOCCHIO'S PLACE

IN HISTORY

(Re-write)

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back :-

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November 14, 1991

The events associated with a miller named Menocchio, who was condemned and executed as a heretic in 1599, can be viewed in terms of a larger historical movement known as the Reformation. This is brought out after review of two historical works - The Cheese and The Worms - The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller by Carlos Ginzburg, and The Age of Reform, 1250-1550 by Steven Ozment. Ginzburg's book provides an excellent detailed account of Menocchio's trials while Ozment's book provides a comprehensive overview of the Reformation from an intellectual and religious point of view. Although both works differ substantially in style and content, when viewed together, Menocchio's place in history can be better appreciated.

The Cheese and The Worms is an intriguing and enlightening account of how a miller from the town of Friuli, Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio, was tried twice by the Roman Inquisition representing the Catholic Church, for uttering statements considered heretical. Menocchio was tried in 1583 and again in 1599. What makes Ginzburg's account particularly significant is that it is based upon official records of the proceedings compiled by the inquisitorial court. According to Ginzburg, "a permanent and indispensable member of every inquisitorial court was the notary (or clerk deputized to assume this function), who transcribed in writing as the legal manuals required 'not only all the defendant's responses and any statements he might make, but also what he might utter during torture, even his sighs, his cries, his laments and

tears.'"<sup>1</sup> Ginzburg also writes that "the notary's charge was to transcribe everything that transpired verbatim."<sup>2</sup>

If Ginzburg is correct, then the veracity of his account is difficult to doubt and must be afforded a high degree of credibility in terms of what actually transpired.

What makes the story of Menocchio even more revealing is not only that it provides an account of the trials that were conducted and underscores those issues which were of importance to the Catholic Church, but also provides a wealth of information concerning the views, beliefs and attitudes from a member of the "subordinate class" whose culture has generally been ignored and about which little is known. It is Ginzburg's position that "the culture of the subordinate class is largely oral, and that it was even more so in centuries past.... This means that the thoughts, the beliefs, and the aspirations of the peasants and artisans of the past reach us (if and when they do) almost always through distorting viewpoints and intermediaries."<sup>3</sup> Thus the record of the trials of Menocchio offers an invaluable glimpse into the mentality of a member of that segment of society whose views have been unarticulated or subject to distortion by members of the "dominant class" which possessed the written culture and from which information concerning the peasantry has been derived.

Menocchio's religious views are one of the central topics of Ginzburg's story. Ginzburg points out that Menocchio believed in a religious materialism which went so far as to purport that God not only had not created the universe, but

had emerged, along with the rest of the universe, "from chaos, that 'great and crude' matter," by spontaneous generation, "produced by nature."<sup>4</sup> What is particularly remarkable about Ginzburg's account is how Menocchio's views differed so completely from that of the Catholic Church. This is surprising when considering the cultural and social milieu in which Menocchio lived and was raised. There is no reason to suspect that a miller living in a small town in northern Italy in the late sixteenth century, in an area where the Catholic faith has been supreme for centuries, would have held views which were at such total variance with that of the Church. After all, Italy was, and still is, the home of the Pope! Yet, according to Ginzburg, the story of Menocchio did in fact occur. A surprise indeed.

Despite the surprising revelations found in Ginzburg's book, it has a serious drawback. The main problem of Ginzburg's account of Menocchio's story is the scope of the story itself. Although the account is compelling and revealing of Menocchio's views, and its credibility is almost entirely beyond question, it is nonetheless essentially the story of only one man, and as such does not provide a sufficiently broad data base from which inferences can be drawn. This is the case because Ginzburg does not offer any additional corroborating evidence to suggest that Menocchio's views were also held by others. Therefore, when reading Ginzburg's book, the question of whether Menocchio's views constitute an accurate reflection of how his peers also may have felt remains unanswered, and

remains a topic for further speculation and research.

In contrast to Ginzburg, Ozment offers a comprehensive overview of an entire historical movement covering a period of three hundred years. In his book, Ozment examines the intellectual and religious trends which are associated with the Reformation in Europe. Ozment bases his work on an impressive array of secondary sources as well as a more limited reliance on primary sources. Ozment's book is informative, well written, well researched, and interesting. But what Ozment's book glaringly fails to convey is a sense of how the Reformation affected the individual living during that time. Ozment provides an excellent perspective of the Reformation as a historical concept, but ignores what the Reformation meant to the lives of the common folk who lived through those momentous times.

Ginzburg helps to bridge the gap in Ozment's historiography. By reading Ginzburg's account of Menocchio, the intellectual and religious changes discussed in Ozment's book are transformed from broad historical generalizations, with no apparent relevancy to anyone except to the famous historical figures cited in the text, into manifestations of change seen at the grass-root level. For instance, the chapters in Ozment's book covering Luther, Erasmus, and the Counter Reformation can be better appreciated after considering how the changes and innovations described in those chapters were reflected by Menocchio and the inquisitorial court which

tried him. Thus, when Ozment describes how Luther promulgated a new religious doctrine which set himself against the Church and led to a major schism in European Christendom, this is indeed an important topic for serious consideration. But when the consequences of Luther's action, including the Church's reaction, are perceived in terms of what happened to Menocchio, based upon the sworn testimony of Menocchio himself, the history comes alive and the consequences of Luther's actions, as it effected one common man, becomes plainly apparent. The schism and Counter Reformation described by Ozment are no longer merely historical terms devoid of any emotional content, but after reading about Menocchio, come to mean trial, intimidation, torture, suffering, ostracism, suppression, and the imposition of control through the use of terror.

It is difficult to judge whose historical work is more effective - Ginzburg's or Ozment's. Both books differ substantially in content, style, and methodology, yet both offer much though each are not without their shortcomings. It seems that the question of effectiveness is related to a fundamental factor, namely, the reliability and relevancy of the sources used. Obviously, any historical study will be flawed if its sources are flawed. But ~~in the cases of Ginzburg and Ozment, that is not a problem.~~ Therefore, the preferability of either work must be dependent instead on the kind of information being

sought. For instance, to gain insights into the actual dynamics of the Roman Inquisition, Ginzburg's book would be more preferable to Ozment's. On the other hand, to gain a greater understanding of the Roman Inquisition's place in history, and the historical factors which influenced the Roman Inquisition's actions and decisions concerning Menocchio, Ozment's book would be more preferable. Nonetheless, without intending to impugn the value of either work, for both have much to offer, it seems that the historical methodology employed by Ginzburg, although limited in scope, has produced a compelling psycho-social account of an individual which is more satisfying, and ultimately more revealing, than the historical overview presented by Ozment. Ozment was not the first person to examine the era of the Reformation. Ginzburg's study, on the other hand, may be one of a kind which gives it a special importance from an historical, anthropological, and psychological point of view..

In conclusion, Ginzburg and Ozment offer two historical studies, both significantly different in style, content, and methodology, which, nonetheless, when considered together, not only provides valuable insights into peasant attitudes and religious beliefs during the sixteenth century, but affords an opportunity to view the trials and tribulations of the common man, Menocchio, within a

larger historical context, and in the process, gain a greater understanding and appreciation of Menocchio's place in history.



FOOTNOTES

1. Ginzburg, Carlo, The Cheese and The Worms - The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Penguin Books, New York, N.Y.), 1986, p.ix
2. Ibid., p.ix
3. Ibid., p.xv
4. Ibid., p.57

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ginzburg, Carlo, The Cheese and The Worms - The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Penguin Books, New York, N.Y.0, 1986

Ozment, Steven, The Age of Reform, 1250-1550 (Yale University Press), 1980