

MENOCCHIO'S PLACE

IN HISTORY

This is nice - but you should
leave out one important critical
point: Gornost is doing something
totally different from Ginsburg - what
is it? What question is he asking?
materials? And you send to Ginsburg
brief summary of Gornost's methods?
then you can point out that it
puts Ginsburg's story in a ~~new~~
perspective - and you do need to
say how novel Ginsburg is and
what shortcomings his deduction
may have.

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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 and 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 reviewed together, Menocchio's place in history can be better appreciated.

Good point, but the important thing to note is that Ginzburg is writing a history

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.'" Ginzburg also writes that "the notary's charge was to transcribe everything that transpired verbatim."² 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."³ 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 views, as recorded by the Catholic Church, are compelling. He denounced the pretensions of the clergy, their wealth and the ^{denounced} use of Latin. Ginzburg quotes Menocchio as stating "I think speaking Latin is a betrayal of the poor because in lawsuits the poor do not know what is being said and are crushed; and if they want to say four words they need a lawyer."⁴ Menocchio bitterly complained about the

pretentiousness of the clergy when he said "You priests and monks, you too want to know more than God, and you are like the devil, and you want to become gods on earth, and know as much as God, following in the footsteps of the devil. In fact, the more one thinks he knows, the less he knows."⁵ As for the Church's wealth, Menocchio complained that the clergy [of the Church] used their wealth to oppress the poor and called on the Church to abandon its privileges and reduce itself to poverty. Menocchio stated: "And it seems to me that under our law, the pope, cardinals, and bishops are so great and rich that everything belongs to the church and to the priests, and they oppress the poor, who, if they work two rented fields, these will be fields that belong to the Church, to some bishop or cardinal."⁶ Contrasting the rich and corrupt Church he saw with the poverty and purity of a mythical primitive Church, Menocchio said: "I wish that [the Church] were governed lovingly as it was when it was founded by our Lord Jesus Christ...now there are pompous Masses, and the Lord Jesus Christ does not want pomp."⁷ Menocchio also rejected all the sacraments, including baptism, as human inventions, as "merchandise," instruments of exploitation and oppression in the hands of the clergy. For instance, about confession Menocchio declared: "You might as well go and confess to a tree as to priests and monks."⁸ It is clear that Menocchio had a hostile, cynical attitude toward the Church, which he saw as an instrument of oppression, fostering beliefs and practices designed to mislead the people,

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and employing imposters posing as representatives of God who used their positions for economic gain.

And what were Menocchio's religious beliefs? According to Ginzburg, Menocchio's views reflected a peasant religion that had very little in common with that preached by the priest from his pulpit. Ginzburg describes Menocchio's religious views as ^{such word construction} one of materialism. For example, referring to God, Menocchio said that "if he really was God Almighty he would let himself be seen."⁹

Indeed, according to Ginzburg, Menocchio's mental and linguistic world was marked by the most absolute literalism.¹⁰ As an example of this literalism, during a discussion concerning why Christ did not descend from the cross, Menocchio said that Christ did not descend because "Christ wasn't able to" and not because he did not want to show obedience to the Jews.¹¹

Clearly, to Menocchio, it would have been physically impossible for Christ to descend from the cross since he was literally nailed, and therefore firmly secured, to the cross. However, the most striking example of Menocchio's religious materialism was his belief on how the universe began. According to Ginzburg, Menocchio testified that, in his opinion, "all was chaos... and out of that bulk a mass formed - just as cheese is made out of milk - and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels, and among that number of angels, there was also God, he too having been created out of that mass at the same time...."¹² Thus, according to Menocchio, not only had God not created the universe, but indeed had emerged "from chaos, that 'great and crude' matter," by spontaneous generation, "produced by nature."¹³ Menocchio's position differed so completely from the Biblical account that the

inquisitors hearing this testimony must have been startled.

Where did this miller get such ideas?

Where Menocchio may have gotten his ideas, and where his story fits into a larger historical picture, is answered by Ozment who provides the historical frame of reference ^{not on Menocchio's illustration: Ginzburg!} in which Menocchio's story can be viewed. For instance, during a review of Ginzburg's book, it becomes apparent that the Church was acting to suppress views which could conceivably undermine its position in society. This position is confirmed by Ozment in his chapter on the Catholic Church and Counter Reformation. In this chapter, Ozment brings out that during the Council of Trent, which was concluded in December 1563, twenty years before Menocchio's first trial, two sources of Church authority were upheld: Scripture and tradition, the rulings of popes and councils. In addition, there would be no compromise with any other doctrines. The Council's "overriding concerns were, first, to establish the machinery for tight control over religious life so that a revolution like that of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin would never again occur in the church...." ¹⁴ After reviewing this chapter in Ozment's book, the Roman Inquisition's interest in Menocchio becomes more understandable from a broader historical standpoint, and the source of its authority is clarified. Based upon the decisions made during the Council of Trent, there was absolutely no way that the Catholic Church was going to tolerate the kind of comments that Menocchio had publicly espoused. Menocchio was undoubtedly seen as a troublemaker, rabble-rouser and malcontent who was treated

accordingly by the Catholic Church which was intent on maintaining control.

As for Menocchio's criticisms of the clergy, the wealth of the Church, and the sacraments, it seems that his comments were consistent with the views of Erasmus who, according to Ozment, endorsed a simple biblical piety and opposed superstition and empty ceremony within the medieval church.¹⁵ And Menocchio's skepticism of Church doctrine reflects what was, according to Ozment, "the key religious problem" for Luther: "one of trust and belief - transformation from a state of doubt and uncertainty to confidence in words and promises that lacked immediate verification."¹⁶ Like Luther, Menocchio expressed doubts concerning what the Catholic Church preached, since he was expected to accept on faith a religious doctrine which he, as a person who had a strongly literal mentality and who viewed the world in concrete terms, would inevitably have to reject.

Both Erasmus and Luther published their beliefs many years before Menocchio's trials. Although Ginzburg provides a list of books which were found in Menocchio's house, where Menocchio actually got his ideas is a matter for speculation. It is unknown whether Menocchio was directly influenced by the teachings of Erasmus or Luther. But after reviewing Ozment's book, it seems that it is not entirely inconceivable that Menocchio would not have had some knowledge of Erasmus or Luther, particularly since

their beliefs had already been printed and disseminated, and Menocchio knew how to read. In fact, Ginzburg brings out that Menocchio made statements specifically referring to Lutherans which meant that he had some awareness of Lutheran ideas.¹⁷ In addition, Ginzburg points out that one of the books mentioned during Menocchio's second trial, the Supplementum supplementi delle croniche... by Jacapo Filippo Foresti, which may have been read by Menocchio, contains pages which tell of Martin Luther and the schism within the Catholic Church.¹⁸

In conclusion, Ginzburg and Ozment offer two historical studies, both significantly different in style, content, and methodology, which nonetheless, when considered together, not only provide valuable insights into peasant attitudes and religious beliefs during the sixteenth century, but affords an opportunity to examine how these attitudes and beliefs may have conflicted with the official theology of the Catholic Church and how the Catholic Church dealt with this conflict and why. By viewing Menocchio within the larger historical context presented by Ozment, Menocchio is transformed from a loud-mouthed, indiscreet, rabble-rousing miller who is merely one of the masses, into a champion for change, who has an important place in history, following, albeit unbeknownst to him, in the footsteps of Erasmus and Luther.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ginzburg, Carlo, The Cheese and The Worm - 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.9
5. Ibid., p.10
6. Ibid., p.9
7. Ibid., p.78
8. Ibid., p.10
9. Ibid., p.68
10. Ibid., p.62
11. Ibid., p.98
12. Ibid., p.53
13. Ibid., p.57
14. Ozment, Steven, The Age of Reform, 1250-1550 (Yale University Press), 1980, pp.406-407
15. Ibid., p.291
16. Ibid., p.243
17. Ginzburg, Carlo, The Cheese and The Worm - The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Penguin Books, New York, N.Y.), 1986, p.18
18. Ibid., pp.78-79

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