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Badea, Andreea, Bruno Boute, Marco Cavarzere, and Steven Vanden Broecke, eds. Making Truth in Early Modern Catholicism

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Badea, Andreea, Bruno Boute, Marco Cavarzere, and Steven Vanden Broecke, eds.

Making Truth in Early Modern Catholicism.

Scientiae Studies. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. Pp. 336 + 1 ill. ISBN 978-9-4637-2052-6 (hardcover) €109.

This remarkable collection of essays explores the processes of negotiation underlying the construction of truth in early modern Catholicism. Recent scholarship has been reassessing the notion of a “triumphant” post-Tridentine Roman church, reserving instead ample space to sceptical strands, uncertainty, and compromise that accompanied the birth of the early modern categories of “belief” and “truth.” Uncertainty, of course, did not affect only the Roman church: rather, it was a transversal phenomenon. Recent studies by, among others, Ethan Shagan (*The Birth of Modern Belief: Faith and Judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment*, 2018) and Stefania Tutino (*Uncertainty in Post-Reformation Catholicism: A History of Probabilism*, 2017), have brilliantly reinstated doubt and uncertainty at the centre of early modern knowledge. The Roman Catholic Church in particular appears to be a much less monolithic institution than the *vulgata* would suggest. The mainstream narrative of a church fiercely opposing and battling the “new science” on the one hand and the many reformed churches on the other hand looks less and less tenable. The flourishing of casuistry and probabilistic thought shows instead the great ability of the Roman Church to adapt to the challenges—economical, cultural, political, and scientific—that the increasing complexity of the late Renaissance world posed. In this respect, I find particularly striking the notion of “conflict zones” adopted by Rivka Feldhay in this volume (“Disciplining the Sciences in Conflict Zones: Pre-Classical Mechanics between the Sovereign State and the Reformed Catholic Religion,” 305–29). Feldhay’s essay considers the reciprocal connections between the new sovereign states, or the realm of politics on one hand, and church and science on the other. In passing, I shall note that politics, religion, and science represent the main focus of the essays here gathered. Feldhay’s study accounts for the “boundary work” leading to the construction of “discursive objects” across these three realms: such work may lead to “frictions and conflicts” but eventually is able to produce cultural mediation (all quotes from p. 307).

The essays gathered in this volume do not suggest a naïve irenic view of early modern culture; political and religious conflicts as well as the clash between the

Catholic church and the non-Catholic world characterize many of the essays. Yet, the church as it emerges from these essays appears to be besieged by doubt on many levels and quite busy elaborating the tools to overcome such doubts. Previously unknown customs and people, as well as deep-seated traditions that it would have been unwise to eradicate, gave the church reason to be cautious. Hence, for example, a certain tolerance of oaths on “false gods”—something that the broadening of trade beyond the boundaries of the Mediterranean space had brought to Roman attention (Marco Cavarzere, “Regulating the Credibility of Non-Christians: Oaths on False Gods and Seventeenth-Century Casuistry,” 63–84). Hence, also, the acceptance of marriages between Catholics and Calvinists in the Low Countries (Cecilia Cristellon, “Choosing Information, Selecting Truth: The Roman Congregations, the Benedictine Declaration, and the Establishment of Religious Plurality,” 279–303). As Cavarzere suggests, “during the early modern period, norms often did not seek to enforce decisions but to affirm consent and strengthen the legitimacy of the social system” (79). In order to build the proper space for legitimacy and consent despite the growing intricacies of politics, economy, and science, the church and its theologians elaborated at length on crucial categories such as probable opinions and reasonable disagreement. Casuistry and moral theology thus stretched the boundaries of truth to accommodate facts and their interpretations and to uphold “controversial opinions,” as pointed out by Rudolf Schuessler (“Scholastic Approaches to Reasonable Disagreement,” 41–61, 58).

The assumption underlying the essays gathered in this volume is that “truth is the glamorous concept which Western communities have typically used to sign off and black box the enormous amount of costly and unglamorous work that goes into their epistemic practices” (8). Truth, far from being “out there,” discovered and described by its neutral beholders, is instead “manufactured and administrated by a multitude of historical actors” (10). This holds true also when it comes to religious truth, for example in the case of saints and their “construction” investigated by Birgit Emich (“The Production of Truth in the Manufacture of Saints: Procedures, Credibility and Patronage in Early Modern Processes of Canonization,” 165–90). The working hypotheses of the editors is not only that there is a lot of “unglamorous” work that goes into the construction of truth and that scholars need to unearth. They also maintain that the question of “*how* communities of belief [...] held together through everyday practice” is more relevant than that of “*what* [...] holds collectives

together *in principle*" (11). The result of this work of deconstruction is that the awareness of uncertainty is to be found not only at the "anomalous fringes" (12) of the early modern Western world but at its "very core": here, "cohesion" appears to be the result of "performative acts and instable negotiations" (12). This volume therefore adopts a praxeological approach, i.e., turns its attention from theoretical questions concerning how Catholicism overcame its uncertainties to the practices adopted by given actors in given contexts to achieve such a result. Another assumption that seems to me especially relevant is the comparison between science and religion as the two main fields in which truth was produced. This approach prompts fascinating questions, such as those concerning the credibility of the scholarly personae in charge of sanctioning truth. It also introduces some crucial remarks, namely that "science and religion remained committed to the regulative principle of an absolute truth" but that "the contents or consequences of such absolute truths remained strikingly elusive, controversial, and disputed throughout much of the early modern period" (15).

The twelve essays are divided into three sections titled, respectively, "Accommodating," "Performing," and "Embedding." In the words of the editors, the first section aims to illustrate "localized and situational truths as both the object and the product of accommodation" (32). For example, as Brendan Röder points out in his essay on priests' diseases ("Appearance and Essence: Speaking the Truth about the Body in the Early Modern Catholic Church," 111–31), which could impede the right performance of rites, the Roman Church could seek a balance between the truth of the legal-medical discourse and the *fama* and popular opinion and perception of the disease. The essence of illness and its appearance were kept distinct, and the truth of the legal-medical discourse obliterated in favour of popular perception if need be. The second section of the volume focuses more on central institutions exploring how "liturgical, administrative, and censorial performance created a salutary order which represented itself as the guardian, and depository of truth" (32). This section deals with censorship, historiography, the canonization of saints, psychology, and heresy: in other words, with how the Roman Church (re)shaped its own history, past, present, and future. Finally, the third section delves into the slippery world of embedded truth, arguing that "embedding actually makes uncertain and impure realities and beliefs more real(istic) than pure ones, while the much-coveted anteriority of truth proves to be a product

of careful discursive or plain practical manipulations and deletions” (32). We have already considered the notion of “conflict zones” elaborated by Feldhay, which can be applied also to the other two essays comprising this section.

All these practices allowed, in the editors’ evocative words, “truth to navigate Peter’s bark through thick fogs of doubt” (32). The essays gathered in this volume, as well as the excellent introduction by the editors, make a significant contribution to the history of early modern Catholicism and its relations to Europe and the world; to the history of science, and of its connection with religion; and to the expanding historiography on early modern uncertainty and doubt.

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Bernard-Pradelle, Laurence, Christine de Buzon, Jean-Eudes Girot et Raphaële Mouren, édés.

Marc Antoine Muret, un humaniste français en Italie.

Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance 610. Genève : Droz, 2020. 650 p. ISBN 978-2-600-05972-2 (broché) 139.40 CHF.

Ce volume édité par Laurence Bernard-Pradelle, Christine de Buzon, Jean-Eudes Girot et Raphaële Mouren propose une analyse détaillée de plusieurs aspects de l’œuvre de Marc Antoine Muret, fascinant protagoniste de la Renaissance aussi bien française qu’italienne. Cette collection de vingt-quatre articles est organisée en cinq parties, précédées par une riche introduction où Jean-Eudes Girot dévoile « un trait marquant du caractère de Muret, cette indécision qui prend la forme d’une oscillation incessante entre des modèles de vie opposés, mais également désirés » (19–56 : 19). Dans cette « vie faite d’équilibres souvent fragiles », les livres de la bibliothèque de Muret deviennent « les fondements sur lesquels repose tout l’édifice de son œuvre » (22).

La première partie du volume, intitulée « La bibliothèque de Marc Antoine Muret », s’ouvre sur une contribution de Marina Venier sur la fortune qu’a connu la *Bibliotheca Mureti* après la mort de Muret, ainsi que sur l’inclusion d’une partie de ce patrimoine dans la Bibliothèque nationale de Rome (56–77).