

Giordano Bruno in Wittenberg (1586-1588)

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In 1600, the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno was burnt alive in Rome as a heretic. People today remember him mostly for his cosmological theories, including the idea that the universe is infinite and that earth is not its centre. But Bruno's original works are concerned with much more.

A 'Lutheran' burnt alive

In a letter to Konrad Rittershausen dated 17 February 1600, Kaspar Schoppe, the German humanist, who had recently converted to Catholicism, gave notice to Rittershausen, his former law professor, about what had happened at first light that day in Campo de' Fiori, Rome: Giordano Bruno had been burnt alive at the stake for *pertinacious heresy*.

The news circulating in Rome, though, was that a *Lutheran* had been burnt alive overnight following condemnation by the Inquisition, after a trial lasting almost ten years that was begun in Venice and later transferred to Rome. Schoppe feared that the news would have reached Germany in such a distorted way that his professor would have been convinced that the Church of Rome was burning Lutherans alive at the stake. Therefore, in order to

explain what really happened in Rome, he decided to send a detailed report of the days between the reading of the sentence and the death of the poor man.

Schoppe, who declares himself an eyewitness of the events in Rome, writes to the lawyer that it is true that a man had been burnt alive at the stake after a long trial begun in Venice, but it is not true that the man was a Lutheran. According to the humanist, the confusion arose by the use of 'Lutheran' as a synonym for 'heretic' in the ordinary Italian language.

Having followed the last part of the trial and been present at the reading of the condemnation and the grounds for the judgment, Schoppe can reassure his Lutheran professor that the man burnt alive at the stake had been condemned as a *relapse* (lat. relapsus) i.e., a pertinacious heretic, and not as a *Lutheran*. In fact, as Schoppe had already tried many times to explain to his former professor, Pope Clement VIII demonstrated an attitude of goodwill toward Lutherans and Calvinists in Italy. As long as the Reformers do not openly preach their beliefs or intentionally cause riots, they are free to live in Italy as they wish.

How to handle heretics

Schoppe's letter must be interpreted within the context of a broader discussion between the two German intellectuals concerning how heresy charges were handled by the Inquisition tribunals and the Pope in Rome. In 1599, Schoppe had already published a letter addressed to Rittershausen on this topic (*Epistola de variis fidei catholicae dogmatibus ad quendam in Germania iurisprudentiae doctorem et professorem*, Ingolstadt).

One year later, the case of Giordano Bruno, whose trial was conducted by some of the most important Inquisitors, such as the Jesuit Roberto Bellarmino, gave Schoppe the opportunity to substantiate not only the thesis of the benevolence of the Pope towards Lutherans and Calvinists, but also the intellectual accuracy of the Inquisitors in distinguishing between the different heresies and between heretics and the Reformers.

Burning alive at the stake was, indeed, a method of execution specifically intended by the Inquisitors for those heretics called relapses (Eliseo Masini, *Sacro arsenale overo Pratica dell'Officio della S. Inquisitione*, Rome 1693). These were considered pertinacious heretics because they had relapsed into heresy or because their heresy, drawing on pagan-philosophical convictions, was not eradicable. This might have been the case with that Giordano Bruno, as some of the grounds for the judgement reported by Schoppe in the letter suggest.

But who was *that* Giordano Bruno? Why was his name so famous that Schoppe was sure the news of his death would have quickly circulated in Europe and in the Reformed milieus as well?

Who was Giordano Bruno?

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was an Italian philosopher born in Nola near Naples. At the core of his philosophical reflection there is the notion of an infinite, atomistically conceived universe. From this idea Bruno derives the concept of God as Monad and that of nature as a shadow of the infinite universe, the knowledge of which can be only *hunted for* by following the traces of the divine order hidden in the shadows of nature and represented in the logical and mnemonic pictorial languages.

Bruno studied theology at the *studium generale* in Naples where he entered the Dominican monastery in 1565 and was ordained as a priest in 1573. Due to his unorthodox readings and ideas, which scholars consider to already have been mature when he entered the Dominican order, he was forced to leave the monastery, flee from Naples, and begin an almost fifteen-year European wandering. During the different stages of his itineraries, Bruno experienced the many aspects of the Reformation, read books by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Philipp Melancthon, held teaching positions in the major universities of the time, and was well-connected with the political and academic networks as well with those of printers.

In 1579, the philosopher lived and worked as a proofreader in Geneva, where he first embraced Calvinism and was then excommunicated after conflict with the Calvinist theologians and therefore forced to leave the city. From Geneva, Bruno moved to Lyon and Toulouse, where he stayed almost two years (1579-1581), as a reader in philosophy, teaching Aristotle's *De anima* and Johannes

de Sacrobosco's *De Sphaera*. Because of the religious turmoil in the region, Bruno left Toulouse and arrived in Paris (1581-1583), where he joined the court of Henry III and taught mnemonics as one of the royal lecturers at the Collège de France.

As soon as the religious conflicts escalated in Paris as well, Bruno left for London (1583-1585). Here the philosopher entered into contact with many intellectuals of the Elizabethan court, such as Philip Sidney, John Florio, and Alberico Gentili, but, in the attempt to obtain a position at the University of Oxford, he came into conflict with the Puritans. Finally, in 1586, after a short return to Paris, Bruno escaped to Germany where he spent one of the longest and most fruitful stays of his *peregrinatio europea*. Bruno's German wanderings would end in Frankfurt in 1591 with the printing of the so-called *Frankfurt Works*, the pinnacle of his philosophical reflection.

Two years in Wittenberg

Wittenberg marked the first stage of Giordano Bruno's German itineraries. The *Album Academiae Vitebergensis* registers his matriculation in the local university in August 1586. With the help of Alberico Gentili, an Italian jurist and academic he had met in London, the philosopher obtained a position as teacher of rhetoric at the faculty of philosophy and kept this role until his departure from Wittenberg in 1588. This was the most important city of the Reformed world, where students not only from Germany but also from Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries wanted to study.

In Wittenberg Bruno attended to the writing of some of his most important

works on rhetoric, in which he also engaged with aspects of Aristotelian rhetoric, logic, and psychology. Language, soul, and nature are the philosophical concepts that Bruno tries to reframe, also in the wake of the new ideas that were circulating in the astronomical environments both in Marburg and in Wittenberg where the scientific reform had been set in motion by the Copernican revolution.

Having read the works of the Reformers, the philosopher was already familiar with their ideas when he arrived in the *Luther Stadt*, and for him they were *pedants* (*Spaccio de la bestia trionfante*, London 1584; *La cabala del cavallo pegaseo*, London 1585) who did not deserve the appellation of *theologians*. Despite his initially negative opinion of the Protestant Reformation and its representatives, at the end of his stay in Wittenberg Bruno acknowledged that among Lutherans he experienced a salient quality of tolerance within which he finally felt free to attend to his philosophical works (*Oratio valedictoria*, Wittenberg 1588). Direct experience of the Reformation caused Bruno to reframe his opinion of it, praising the intellectual, social, and political Lutheran environments where he lived and worked as a professor.

In spite of his nuanced criticism of the Reformation, Bruno had lived with the Reformers, had contributed to the cultural life of many important universities, and had educated many students there. Kaspar Schoppe, therefore, knew that the death of *that* Giordano Bruno would have resonated not only in Germany but among the European intellectuals – as it actually did.

Bruno and the Reformation

Scholars of Renaissance philosophy and Bruno scholars always mention the Reformation as the cultural background to the philosopher's *peregrinatio*. Nevertheless, the question of the relation between Bruno and the Reformation has not yet been carefully and directly investigated. Scholars have focused mainly on Bruno's critique of the Reformation in the *Spaccio* and *Cabala* without considering the hypothesis that in Bruno's works there might be traces of the discussions he conducted with the Lutherans (Luigi Firpo, *Il processo di Giordano Bruno*, 1993: deposition of Giordano Bruno to the Venetian Inquisitors on June 2 1592, in which the philosopher explains that he lived with the Lutherans in Germany and that he discussed philosophy extensively with them).

Considering the length of time and his degree of productivity during the periods when Bruno was in areas that were heavily influenced by Lutheran thought, it is my hypothesis that the new ideas and his experience of the societal reform taking place in these parts of Europe had

a decisive impact on his own project of philosophical reform and on the works he composed in Germany. Therefore, I am working on a comparative interpretation of Melanchthon's and Bruno's notions of language and the soul through textual analysis. Three historical accounts of Wittenberg, which draw on findings from Reformation Studies, will contextualise the textual analysis and Bruno's stay from new perspectives. The historical accounts focus on the Danish intellectuals in Bruno's network, the Gnesio-Lutheran debate, and the role of women in Wittenberg among the second-generation Reformers.

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Jesper Tang Nielsen forsvarer sin doktordisputats

Den johannæiske konflikt mellem filosofisk progression og teologisk tradition.

En kommentar til Johannesbrevene med særligt henblik på forholdet til Johannesevangeliet.

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