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Possevino's Papalist Critique of French Political Writers

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In 1592 at the urging of Innocent IX Antonio Possevino, the much travelled Jesuit diplomat and scholar, published *Iudicium de Nuae militis Galli, Ioannis Bodini, Philippi Mornaei, et Nicolai Machiavelli quibusdam scriptis*. The volume is a criticism of the French political thinkers Gentillet, La Noue, Bodin, and Mornay from a strongly papalist viewpoint. An abbreviated version of the *Iudicium* was included in Possevino's influential *Bibliotheca selecta*. The Jesuit attacked Innocent Gentillet's interpretation of the St. Bartholomew's Massacre as an Italian-Catholic plot based on Machiavelli's recommendations. He criticized Bodin for being too sympathetic to Huguenots, for Judaizing tendencies, for allowing duelling, and for suggesting that the papacy be made hereditary. Possevino found grave doctrinal error behind Mornay's efforts at an ecumenical piety. He developed a sustained attack on La Noue's plea that Catholics and Protestants put aside their differences and combine forces in a crusade against the Turks: La Noue's call for toleration ignores the enormous doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants and among various groups of Protestants. In the past such toleration has led only to sedition and civil war. Years later Possevino read Jacques Auguste de Thou's *Historia sui temporis* (Volume I, 1604) with great interest. In an attempt to influence de Thou's second volume in a more Catholic direction he sent de Thou personal reminiscences of his years (1560-72) in France. De Thou resisted Possevino's attempt to influence him. Possevino's reading of the French political writers suggests how contemporaries often miss the main contribution of innovative thinkers such as Machiavelli and Bodin and become bogged down in detail.

AT TWENTY-SEVEN ANTONIO POSSEVINO (1533-1611) threw over a promising career as a humanist and entered the Jesuits. Within a year he was debating theology with the Waldensians and founding colleges in Savoy. There followed 28 years of incessant activity in France, Italy, Sweden, Muscovy, Poland, and Transylvania; along the way he helped found seven colleges or seminaries and negotiated a peace between Poland and Ivan the Terrible. He also incurred the displeasure of Sixtus V, of the Jesuit General Claudio Aquaviva, and of the House of Habsburg so that in 1587 he found himself exiled to the Jesuit college at Padua. *Otium* followed *negotium*, but Possevino's *otium* was not very restful. In 1591 he was back in Rome with a giant manuscript to be shepherded through the Vatican Press, his *Bibliotheca selecta*. Its thousand folio pages provided a bibliographic guide to most areas of Renais-

sance thought. It was the most important of Possevino's forty books and established his reputation as a polymath—*Italorum omnium doctissimus* according to one writer.¹

While at Padua Possevino developed close links with the Venetian Inquisitor, at whose urging he prepared a list of the errors in the works of Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, and Phillippe de Mornay to be given as an antidote to those who asked the Inquisitor for permission to read these prohibited authors.² The Inquisitor also forwarded a copy of Possevino's notes to Cardinal della Rovere of the Congregation of the Index, and Possevino circulated his notes to friends for their comments. When he returned to Rome in 1591 with the manuscript of the *Bibliotheca selecta*, Cesare Baronio, the great church historian, brought Possevino to see an old mutual friend, Gian Antonio Facchinetti, who had just become Innocent IX. Their conversation turned to Possevino's notes, which the Pope encouraged him to publish in both Latin and Italian—in the event there never was an Italian edition. The day previous to his conversation with Innocent IX Possevino received a letter from another old acquaintance, Duke William of Bavaria, who urged him to take up his pen against Machiavelli. Possevino saw this coincidence as providential and got down to work.³ In 1592 the Vatican Press issued his *Iudicium de Nuae militis Galli, Ioannis Bodini, Philippe Mornaei, et Nicolai Machiavelli quibusdam scriptis*. The next year a pirate edition appeared at Lyons.⁴ Possevino included an abbreviated version of his *Iudicium* in the *Bibliotheca selecta*, issued by the Vatican Press in 1593 with a prefatory letter from still another old friend, the new pope Clement VIII.⁵

¹Hugo Hurter, *Nomeclator Literarius Theologiae Catholicae* (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1907), 2:466. The secondary literature on Possevino is very large. I am presently working on a biography. Among the most valuable contributions are Liisi Karttunen, *Antonio Possevino: un diplomate pontifical au XVIe siècle* (Lausanne, 1908); Stanislas Polcin, *Une tentative d'Union au XVIe siècle: La mission religieuse du Père Antoine Possevino S.J. en Moscovie* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1957); Oskar Garstein, *Rome and the Counter-Reformation in Scandinavia*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1963, 1980).

²On 19 November 1588 Monsignore Minuccio Minucci wrote Possevino a letter discussing his manuscript comments on Bodin: see Mario D'Addio, "Les six livres de la republique e il pensiero cattolico in una lettera del Mons. Minuccio Minucci al Possevino" in *Medioevo e rinascimento: Studi in onore di Bruno Nardi* (Florence: Sansoni, 1955), 1: 127-44.

³Possevino described the circumstances behind his *Iudicium* in a letter to Achille Gagliardi, 13 July 1597; Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, *Opp. NN. 333*, ff. 29v, 30r. This letter to his friend Gagliardi together with its tone and content make it clear that Possevino was the author of the *Iudicium*, contrary to the suggestion of Silvio Barbi that Possevino may have used Giovan Battista Strozzi as a ghostwriter. Barbi's other suggestion that Possevino had Strozzi translate the section of the *Iudicium* against La Noue into Latin is more probable. S. A. Barbi, *Un accademico mecenate e poeta: Giovan Battista Strozzi il Giovane* (Florence: Sansoni, 1900), 43.

⁴For this essay I have used the Lyons edition: (Lyon: Buysson, 1593). This edition also prints Possevino's judgment on the Augsburg Confession, on Erasmus, and on the "secta Picardica" as well as another attack on La Noue by Pierre Coret.

⁵The arrangement and material in the *Iudicium* and the *Bibliotheca selecta* differ somewhat; the *Bibliotheca* adds an introduction but radically shortens the section on La Noue.

There were later editions of the *Bibliotheca selecta* at Venice and Cologne. Obviously Possevino's *Iudicium* came with high official approbation.⁶

So much for the external background of Possevino's critique of the French political writers. What of the internal—Possevino's own viewpoint? It was militant papalist Catholicism.⁷ The common thread uniting the political writers that Possevino attacked was precisely their opposition to militant Catholicism; otherwise they were rather diverse since three of them were Huguenots and two were at least nominally Catholic. Possevino can be seen as an almost stereotypical counter-reformer, but he was also eloquent, observant, and clever. His learning was very broad, though often not very deep.

Possevino's critique of Machiavelli has already been studied elsewhere.⁸ The brevity of his remarks on Machiavelli suggests that he was less interested in Machiavelli, who had been answered by others, than in refuting the French political writers he was dealing with. He devotes as much space to refuting the *Anti-Machiavel*, which we now know was written by the Huguenot Innocent Gentillet, as he does to Machiavelli himself.⁹ Possevino did not know the author's identity, but he considered Gentillet's Calvinist comments as evil as the blasphemies of Machiavelli.¹⁰ Gentillet's argument that the St. Bartholomew's Massacre was an Italian-Catholic application of Machiavelli was hardly a thesis likely to please Possevino, who had been personally involved in an unsuccessful attempt to save some Huguenot prisoners in the sequel to St. Bartholomew's at Lyon.

Possevino's critique of Jean Bodin took up three works: the *Methodus Historiae*, the *De Daemonomania*, and the *Six Books on the Republic*. His criticism was not synthetic but pegged to specific passages or chapters in Bodin's works,

⁶Not everybody approved. Sir Henry Wotton, who later when English ambassador at Venice made it a practice to intercept Possevino's correspondence, wrote to his superiors from Siena that Lord Darcy "Having no other way to resist or retract, bought up all the examples" of Possevino's *Iudicium*, apparently those in Tuscany. This aroused the anger of the Inquisition, but the Grand Duke supported Lord Darcy, probably to curry English favor. See the letter of Wotton to Lord Zouche, 25 November 1592, printed in Logan Pearsall Smith, *The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), 1:291-92.

⁷Of the many evidences of Possevino's devotion to the papacy none is so striking as the will that he drew up in 1607 when he felt close to death; in it he prayed to God that whatever form of death "that I may take from this vale of tears shall be to the glory of Thy name and to the honor of the Holy Apostolic See in which Thy vicar infallibly sits": Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu: *Opp. NN.* 333, f. 302.

⁸Antonio Panella, *Gli Antimachiavellici* (Florence: Sansoni, 1943), 54-63.

⁹Innocent Gentillet, *Discours contre Machiavel*, edited by A. D'Andrea and P. D. Stewart (Florence: Casalini Libri, 1974). Both Panella (54-55) and D'Addio (129) claim that Possevino never even read Machiavelli's own text but based his criticism entirely on Gentillet. This assertion was first made by the German polyhistor Hermann Conring (1606-1681), as Panella points out (54). They are both unaware that Conring was answered in the eighteenth century by Nicolo Ghezzi, the Italian editor-translator of Jean Dorigny's *Vita del P. Antonio Possevino* (Venice: Remondini, 1759), 2:71-72.

¹⁰*Bibliotheca selecta* (Rome: Typographia Apostolica Vaticana, 1593), 1:127-28.

which he noted in the margins. Much of it was nit-picking. Possevino found that Bodin's *Methodus Historiae* often relied on Calvin and the Magdeburg Centuries and that it downplayed the role of free will and divine providence. Bodin was both too skeptical in treating Christian miracles and too credulous in relying on astrology as causal explanation. Possevino censured Bodin for following Plato and Xenophon in allowing political leaders to lie for reasons of state. He also took exception to Bodin's claim that the morally good individual made a bad citizen, to his praise for the high morals of Geneva and to his criticism of the papacy.¹¹ The Jesuit noted the relative absence of Christian sources and the heavy dependence on rabbinical authors in Bodin's *De Daemonomania*.¹² Bodin slid over the whole Catholic liturgical and paraliturgical apparatus for dealing with the diabolical. Possevino then developed a theme which D. P. Walker has recently studied,¹³ namely that Catholic controversialists stressed the ability of their rites (especially exorcism for which Protestants had little or no equivalent) to defeat diabolical intervention, which was a major interest for many contemporary writers such as Bodin. Possevino found it ironic that Bodin wanted both religious toleration and the execution of sorcerers, magicians, and witches.¹⁴

Possevino criticized the *Six Books of the Republic* for its reliance on the Old Testament and Jewish sources; had he known Bodin's *Colloquium Heptaplomeres*, which was not published until the nineteenth century, his suspicions of Bodin as a Judaizer would have increased.¹⁵ Possevino claimed that the translation of the *Republic* had been doctored by a third party to make it less offensive to Catholics, but this only sugar-coated a dangerous book.¹⁶ Possevino also pounced upon Bodin for allowing duelling and brandished against him the excommunication of the Council of Trent against those involved with duelling.¹⁷ Possevino agreed with Bodin that Englishmen were ethnocentric and formed little introspective enclaves when abroad. He also claimed that he could always spot a Frenchman who was a Calvinist—look carefully, his downcast eyes always reveal his bad conscience! Possevino disagreed, of course, with Bodin's attack on celibacy and his arguments for special

¹¹Ibid., 130-31.

¹²Ibid., 132-33.

¹³D. P. Walker, "Demonic Possession Used as Propaganda in the Later Sixteenth Century," in *Scienze, credenze occulte, livelli di cultura*, no editor (Florence: Olschki, 1982), 237-48. Possevino (*Judicium*, 96) related the same story of Nicole Obry described by Walker (241-42).

¹⁴*Bibliotheca selecta*, 1: 136.

¹⁵Ibid., 134, 139. Bodin's real religious convictions are the subject of considerable dispute. Externally he claimed to be a Catholic most of his life. The Jewish tendencies are stressed by Paul Lawrence Rose, *Bodin and the Great god of Nature: the Moral and religious Universe of a Judaizer* (Geneva: Droz, 1980).

¹⁶*Bibliotheca selecta* 1:135.

¹⁷Ibid., 138.

taxes on those who do not marry and have children. He also took exception to Bodin's arguments for hereditary versus elective leadership. To Bodin's suggestion that the papacy be made hereditary he noted sarcastically that the Frenchman knew better than Christ, who instituted the papacy. Possevino answered Bodin's claim that the Venetians tended to elect second-rate men as doge with a eulogy of six recent doges, some of whom he knew personally.¹⁸

Possevino's critique of Philippe de Mornay's *De la Vérité de la religion chrétienne* was more succinct. Mornay was even more sinister than Bodin since his book was tricked out in the garb of piety and orthodoxy until one examined it closely. Possevino objected to fourteen statements scattered through Mornay's more than five hundred pages. He quoted Mornay briefly, citing page numbers, and then appended a short refutation. Sometimes he objected on philosophical grounds; thus when Mornay claimed, "We sometimes will what we do not understand," Possevino replied with the standard scholastic doctrine that the human will is never directed toward an unknown object. Sometimes the objections were theological. Against Mornay's statement, "God alone satisfied and can satisfy," Possevino cited the Council of Trent and argued that Christ as the God-man and even human beings in grace with his cooperation could satisfy and merit. Since Mornay's book deliberately avoided issues that divided Catholics and Protestants, Possevino's criticism can only strike modern readers as nit-picking.¹⁹

By far the largest part of Possevino's *Iudicium* was his attack on François de la Noue's *Discours Politiques et Militaires* (1587).²⁰ This section was radically shortened in the *Bibliotheca selecta*, from eighty-seven to four folio pages. La Noue argued that French Catholics and Protestants ought to live together in peace and toleration since what they shared religiously was more important than their differences. Their arms should be turned against a common enemy, the Turk. Meanwhile there should be a General Council, or at least a French National Council, to settle religious issues. La Noue's motive was partly to end the Wars of Religion that had been wracking France and in which he was intimately involved. Little in his discourses pleased Possevino. For Possevino the differences between Catholic and Protestant were enormous and included not only the usual controverted points but also differing views of Christology and

¹⁸Ibid., 131, 139-42.

¹⁹Ibid., 142-44. On Mornay's life, see E. Haag and E. Haag, *La France Protestant* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1966), 7:512-42.

²⁰There is a good modern edition, François de la Noue, *Discours politiques et militaires*, ed. F. E. Sutcliffe (Geneva: Droz, 1967). For his life see Henri Hauser, *François de la Noue (1531-1591)* (Paris: Hachette, 1892). More recent are James J. Supple, "François de la Noue's Plan for a Campaign Against the Turks," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 41 (1979): 273-91, and William H. Huseman, "'Bayard Huguenot'? Un réexam en de la carrière de François de La Noue, 1531-1591," *Bulletin de la Société de L'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 130 (1984): 137-73.

Trinity. Possevino was not a professional theologian, and he did not develop theological arguments; after giving a few scripture quotations, he referred readers to the Catholic controversialists Robert Bellarmine and Thomas Stapleton. He then moved on to historical arguments against religious toleration. His basic argument was that tolerating Protestants led to civil war or unrest, whereas suppression (perhaps with a few judicious executions to encourage the others) was a small price to pay for peace and harmony. He then reviewed the history of Savoy, France, Belgium, and Bavaria to prove his point. La Noue had pointed to Switzerland and Germany as countries where Catholics and Protestants were living together in peace. But, Possevino rejoined, were Catholics allowed to worship in Geneva, or Saxony, or England?²¹

Possevino next posed a host of difficulties to La Noue's proposals for a General or French National Council. What would be the criterion of truth? The Word of God? Of course, but there would be no agreement on its interpretation. Luther and Calvin contradicted each other. Suppose the Augsburg Confession were accepted as a basis—but there were different versions of the *Augustana*. If Catholics allowed Lutherans and Calvinists to vote at such a Council, votes should logically be given to Anabaptists and Antitrinitarians—in some areas such as Transylvania they outnumbered Lutherans and Calvinists. And what about the Eastern Orthodox? What about the Copts, Georgians, Armenians, and the St. Thomas Christians of India? What about votes for women, who shared the same baptism and grace with men?²² What about procedural difficulties—who should settle disputes, set agendas, promulgate and enforce decrees? The Emperor? But he was a good Catholic and denied that he had such authority. Possevino also developed arguments against a more simple accord involving only Catholics and Calvinists. He then contrasted Catholic unity with Protestant diversity in a way that foreshadowed Bossuet's *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes*.²³ So much for a General Council. What about a French National Synod? After a few pages on the glories of the French church and its past synods, Possevino reviewed the history of Catholic-Lutheran-Calvinist colloquies at Worms, Luneberg, Maulbronn, Altemberg, and Dresden. All these failed because Protestants lacked a principle of unity in a strong visible magisterium. Even the Frankfurt book fairs divided their religious offerings into three divisions: Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist.²⁴ Possevino next turned to problems of religious unity in Eastern Europe, where he had expert knowledge. His conclusion was

²¹*Iudicium*, 1-14.

²²*ibid.*, 14-26.

²³*Ibid.*, 26-34.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 34-40.

predictable—in Eastern Europe heresy was not just a seven-headed hydra but a hundred-headed hydra that poisoned kingdoms and destroyed unity.²⁵

La Noue's appeal was mainly to *politiques*, many of whom felt that harmony was possible if each side could give a little ground. But, Possevino retorted, this attitude ignored the fact that Christ built his church on rock. The Church was a given. The *politiques* felt that they could independently negotiate away the articles of faith, a power that neither the papacy nor an ecumenical council had ever claimed. Even popes and councils were not masters of the faith but only dispensers of its mysteries.²⁶

Was religious peace in France obtainable? Yes, replied Possevino, but only on the basis of integral Catholic restoration. He tried to show that two faiths and two peoples could not live together in harmony. He opposed even such minor concessions as communion under both species: that compromise failed when it was tried with the Hussites in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia and with the Lutherans in Bavaria.²⁷ In fact Possevino knew that there was little hope that his Catholic integralism would be tried. He admitted that a cure for heresy was unlikely, but at least French Catholics should hold on to the fullness of faith. Then health might return to others with less danger. Possevino tried to show with selected examples from French history how the past glories of France rested on the Catholic faith. His tour of the horizon of French history put great stress on the role of the king.²⁸ When Possevino was writing in 1592 civil war was still raging in France. Although a zealot, Possevino was careful not to align himself with the Catholic League. He said nothing directly against Henry of Navarre. Indeed Possevino was called from retirement in 1593 by Clement VIII for negotiations dealing with Henry's absolution. In describing kingship Possevino uses the most glorious of images, the sun, now obscured by an eclipse. But the eclipse would soon pass, "ut clarissime micet potestas futuri regis."²⁹ But he said nothing about who was the rightful king: "let him who will be the legitimate king in France know that he must keep his own heart and that of others from evil."³⁰

Possevino closed his treatment of La Noue by attacking his proposed Catholic-Calvinist crusade against the Turks, which would have two columns, one Catholic under the Duke of Lorraine, the other Protestant, presumably under Henry of Navarre. One might expect that Possevino would be sympathetic to this proposal since much of his own diplomatic career was

²⁵Ibid., 41-45.

²⁶Ibid., 45-47.

²⁷Ibid., 51-60.

²⁸Ibid., 69-79.

²⁹Ibid., 72.

³⁰Ibid., 78.

devoted to building an alliance of Poland, Russia, Venice, and the Emperor against the Turk. In fact Possevino opposed La Noue's crusade. God did not favor mixed forces, and such mixed forces had rarely been successful. The Protestant army would hurt relations with the Eastern Orthodox. The added numbers that the Protestants would provide were not needed—with God's help a small but devout army was enough against the Muslims as had been shown by Scanderbeg's victories in the Balkans, by the Portuguese accomplishments in the Indian Ocean, and by the recent defense of Malta by the Knights of Rhodes.³¹ Although La Noue's proposals for toleration and an anti-Turkish crusade must have been attractive to Frenchmen wearied by civil war, his arguments concealed a host of unexamined presuppositions and practical difficulties that Possevino skillfully exposed and exploited.

Possevino's dealings with the last of the French political writers had a different character. In 1604 Jacques Auguste de Thou published the first part of his *Historia sui temporis* covering the years up to 1560. Possevino wrote de Thou an extremely long letter, which covers sixty quarto pages of fine print.³² Possevino told de Thou how fascinating and learned his work was and promised to plug it in two of his own forthcoming books. Possevino, however, gently reproved de Thou for relying on such Protestant writers as Philip Melancthon, John Sleidan, and Isaac Casaubon.

De Thou's second volume was to cover the years 1560 to 1572, the period of Possevino's work in France. He tried to influence the projected volume by supplying de Thou with documents, mostly correspondence, and his reflections on personalities with whom he had had first-hand contact, for instance Gregory XIII, Sixtus V, Innocent IX, Clement VIII, Emmanuel Philibert of Savoy, Michel de l'Hopital, and Pierre Viret. Some of his confidences were those of a garrulous old man—Possevino was then in his seventies. Some were grossly unfair. To give the worst example, he related how after a public debate with Pierre Viret he managed to get the Protestant patriarch aside and begged him to repent of his heresy. Viret put him off with, "C'est tout un," which Possevino took in a sense Viret could hardly have meant, namely that religious dogmas do not matter. Possevino was aghast—the man he thought was merely a heretic turned out an atheist.³³ Possevino concluded his letter by urging de Thou to revise his works in a more Catholic direction, not very subtly suggesting the example of St. Augustine's *Retractationes* and the more recent retraction of Joseph Scaliger. Indeed he even sent a copy of Scaliger's *Elenchus* along with his letter. In the event de Thou retracted nothing.³⁴ On the contrary, his second volume (1608) drew so much Catholic fire that it was put on the *Index*.

³¹Ibid., 80-86.

³²Francesco Antonio Zaccharia published the letter in his *Iter Litterarium per Italiam* (Venice: Sebastiano Coleti, 1762), 264-324.

³³Ibid., 308.

³⁴Ibid., 323-24.

We have traced Possevino's criticism of five French political writers, Gentillet, Bodin, Mornay, La Noue, and de Thou. In one respect the results are disappointing: Possevino was content to attack specific statements rather than delve deeper issues. The criterion he measured these writers against was always his own Counter-Reformation orthodoxy without trying to understand them on their own grounds. His was an era of change in which political thinkers played a major role, the Machiavellian Moment of J. G. A. Pocock. Values that Possevino cherished—stability, universality, hierarchy, and authority—were being replaced by a world and a world view increasingly dominated by progress, nationalism, relativism, and secularism. Possevino would not have liked the brave new world that was foreshadowed by writers such as Machiavelli and Bodin. When we come to Possevino after reading Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* or Julian Franklin's *Jean Bodin and the Sixteenth-Century Revolution in the Methodology of Law and History* we are disappointed that Possevino has missed or at least passed over what was most profound and momentous in these authors. And yet Possevino was an intelligent observer with wide learning and practical experience. He far surpassed the Frenchmen he was criticizing in the experience of lands and peoples; nor was he a man of narrow intellectual horizons. In some sections of the *Bibliotheca selecta* Possevino developed sweeping visions for cultural hegemony and world evangelization which illustrated his ability to build concrete plans of action from his erudition.³⁵ When we look back over the developments of the last four centuries we have the advantage of hindsight and can see how the books of Machiavelli and Bodin carried the seeds of the future and how other ideas that Possevino was attacking, such as La Noue's scheme for a joint Catholic-Protestant crusade against the Turk, had no future; but we know which seeds were destined for good soil and which were to fall on rocky ground. Contemporaries could not see that. We should be grateful when they tell us what they see, for we can learn nearly as much from their blind spots as from their clairvoyance.

³⁵Albano Biondi, "La *Bibliotheca selecta* di Antonio Possevino. Un progetto di egemonia culturale," in *La "Ratio Studiorum": Modelli culturali e pratiche educative dei Gesuiti in Italia tra Cinque e Seicento*, ed. G. P. Brizzi (Rome: Bulzoni editore, 1981), 43-75.