

Emily Michelson
***Catholic Spectacle and Rome's Jews:
Early Modern Conversion and Resistance***

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Emily Michelson has shed valuable light on the question of forced preaching in the Roman Ghetto. We have long known the problem, and various scholars have contributed worthwhile essays on individual preachers, as well as on the many converts who spoke out against their former religion. Where Michelson has dared to innovate is in approaching the topic as a whole and integrating the work of many of these preachers, concentrating on two or three, which is a prudent editorial election, but mostly Gregorio Boncompagni, a Dominican and descendent of the noted Boncompagni-Corcos family, whose conversion must have shaken the late sixteenth-century Roman Jewish Community.

Apart from gathering together an enormous amount of previous research—the bibliography of printed secondary literature extends over an unprecedented forty pages—Michelson has worked her way into the oft-daunting Roman archives, whether of the Vatican, the papal Vicar, the Archive of State (the city), and the Inquisition. The archive of the Roman Jewish Community is utilized mildly, although the material in this archive tends to protests rather than collecting the sermons themselves that are the essence, and most of which have remained in manuscript. The sermons are not easy to read, and we must thank Michelson for her willingness to take on this painstaking task. Doubters need but cast their eyes on the so difficult to decipher manuscript pages reproduced in the book. In addition, a flock of early modern books that speak of preachers and conversion have been studied, in, of course, their original language.

Michelson's argument is that preaching was based on a series of theological commonplaces. These principally steered clear of arousing passions, whether of Christians, including the many, often clerics, who frequented the sermons, but also of sometimes more volatile common folk. Care was taken, she says, not to offend the Jews themselves, who protested, whether in writing or personal entreaty, as did the leading rabbinical figure of the ghetto period Tranquillo Manoah Corcos. During the sermons, Jews stuffed wax in their ears, talked, laughed, or were

boisterous—acts that were rewarded with a poke from a verger's truncheon, also a source of complaint.

Explaining the restraint is that preachers were addressing an audience composed as much, if not more, of “mythical Jews” than the real ones filling the benches of the oratory where sermons were delivered. Mythical Jews, after all, go back to St. Paul himself, who pictured Jews as the physical descendants of Abraham, as opposed to the Christians who were his spiritual heirs and bearers of the truth, which, indeed, Christians grasped, while Jews remained stubbornly blind. Preachers sometimes abandoned the limits and spoke of real Jews, which was prompted as often as not by frustration. Preaching yielded little fruit, certainly less than incursions—at times led by preachers themselves—into the ghetto to “kidnap” persons, especially young children, “offered” by converted relatives to the Church.

Why then all the effort? Because the fate of the Jews, themselves for the most part forlorn, poor, and ghettoized, was taken to illustrate the glory and triumph of the Counter-Reformation Church, especially as displayed in theatrical baptismal ceremonies frequently celebrated by a high cleric and, rarely, by the pope himself. That the Church sought glory and reassurance through public baptismal splendor has been said before, but *Michelson* in treating of the sermons makes the point more forcefully by far than in the past. Her opening chapter deals at length with the importance of conversion, followed by one on the structure of the sermons. We then hear of the preachers with details of the sermons. As expected, sermon contents repeat, and repeat again, old Christian talking points. Jewish rejection was guaranteed, for the most part. That *Michelson* suggests once or twice during the book that a moderate sermonic approach may have been acceptable to Jewish listeners seems to me a touch naive. Roman Jews, as a rule, who, as *Michelson* properly insists, had been Romans before Christianity, found Christianity illogical, and often worse, a source of derision. No wonder that preachers like the Jesuit Antonio Possevin, who is discussed for his sermons, also insisted that the draconian laws put in place by Paul IV, in 1555, be rigidly enforced.

Michelson points to good relations between Jews and Christians in Rome, but later in the book admits that there were flash points and mockery. Preachers could be on both sides of the fence, for example, Antonio Virgulti. I wondered that she did not find Gregory Boncompagni's sermons lauding Pius V perplexing, just as she suggests that Boncompagni modified his arguments in response to Jewish protest. However, Pius V was surely despised in the ghetto. He had renewed the burdensome restrictions of Paul IV and innovated in papal policy by expelling Jews—admittedly, into the ghetto from various small towns of the papal states—rather than beyond its borders as had happened in France, England, Spain, and the Kingdom of Naples. To preach on this pope in order to illustrate the glories of sainthood was to throw sand in Jewish faces. Similarly, Tranquillo Corcos's responses to the sermons, protesting the verger and his actions, must be read as ironic. With his enormous knowledge of Christian texts, Corcos's attitude toward the sermons must be read as taunting through obligatory obsequiousness, which any Jew who read him would have spotted immediately as tongue-in-cheek. Corcos, I believe, was not, as *Michelson* suggests, looking for common ground.

I have some reservations about references, for instance, to an article by Renata Segre, valuable as it is unto itself, to introduce the conversionary revolution of Paul IV. There are more direct discussions. A listing in the bibliography of Marina Caffiero as the editor of the so-called *Diary of Anna del Monte* should have been substituted by a reference to the original Italian edition by Giuseppe Sermoneta, which Caffiero, as she herself says, reproduced (with errors), just as this author's English translation of the diary, relevant to the principally English readers of this book, is unmentioned (albeit the book containing the translation is noted elsewhere). And the reference to changes in taxation strategies in the years just before the start of the Roman ghetto lacks a footnote, even though an entire book has been devoted to it.

With respect to overall structure and the discussion of the sermons, there is a sense of repetitiveness, though sometimes the material itself really left no choice. Nonetheless, Emily Michelson has succeeded in gathering together and creating a unity of two centuries of materials, showing consistent themes and pointing the way to intensive research, in some of which I would imagine she herself is now engaging, further to elaborate the riches in the materials we have now been presented. The book is an important contribution.