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Nicodemism



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Abstract

Nicodemism can be generally defined as the practice of religious (dis)simulation in contexts of more or less open persecution. “Nicodemite” was the name that the sixteenth-century French reformer John Calvin gave to Protestants living in Catholic countries who chose to conceal their faith out of a concern for personal safety. In the 1540s and 1550s, the legitimacy of such a behavior was at the center of a heated controversy stretching from Calvinist Geneva to nearby countries such as Italy, Germany, Holland, and France. While supporters of religious dissimulation invoked a range of scriptural and rational arguments in their own defense – including the illustrious precedent of the Roman Nicodemus, who believed in Christ but visited him only by night out of fear – prominent reformers such as Calvin denounced Nicodemism as morally inexcusable and strategically ruinous for the long-term development of Reformed churches. Historically, the emergence of Nicodemism as a particular form of religious dissimulation buttressed by scriptural and rational arguments is inextricably tied to the specific circumstances of religious life in the Reformed and

philo-Reformed milieus of mid-sixteenth-century Europe. Modern historiographical discourse, however, has often stretched the term Nicodemism well beyond its context of origin, in ways that have not failed to raise debate and that ultimately reflect underlying disagreements about the meaning and essence of Nicodemism itself.

Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

The term “Nicodemism” derives from the word “Nicodemite,” one of several labels used in sixteenth-century Europe to designate religious dissemblers, particularly Protestants who lived in Catholic countries and chose to keep their faith secret in order to escape persecution. The earliest documented instance of the term “Nicodemite” is found in a 1544 tract by the French reformer John Calvin, *Excuse à Messieurs les Nicodemites*, which was later translated into Latin by Calvin himself (*Excusatio ad pseudo nicodemos*, in Calvin 1549) and into Italian by Lodovico Domenichi (*Excusazione a’ Nicodemiti*, in Calvin 1550) (on these translations, see Garavelli 2004; Zuliani 2015).

In the *Excuse*, as in other writings from around the same period, Calvin censured the behavior of all those “lukewarm” Christians who would rather bury their faith deep in their hearts than put their life, freedom, or fortune in danger. What was even worse in Calvin’s eyes was the fact that such

disingenuous “crypto-Reformed” sought to justify their position on the level of principle, by invoking a range of scriptural and rational arguments in defense of religious dissimulation – including the illustrious precedent of the Roman Nicodemus, who believed in Christ but visited him only by night out of fear (John 3:1–15). It was indeed their appropriation of Nicodemus’s example that earned them Calvin’s scornful (and not entirely unproblematic) nickname of “Nicodemites” (Zuliani 2015).

In a series of writings later collected under the title of *De vitandis superstitionibus* (“On Avoiding Superstitions”, 1549), Calvin debunked the Nicodemites’ arguments for religious dissimulation one by one. To their adiaphoristic spiritualism, which played down the importance of outward ceremonies and doctrinal complexities in favor of a simplified form of inner faith, Calvin opposed a powerful “either with us or against us” narrative that ruled out the possibility of any compromise between Roman idolatry and the true faith of the “people of God.” Strongly condemning dissimulation as duplicitous behavior unworthy of a true Christian, Calvin called on all persecuted Protestants to either take the route of exile or steadfastly embrace a martyr’s death (Eire 1986; Shepardson 2007).

While the exact polemical targets of Calvin are difficult to identify with any certainty, the work of several generations of scholars has revealed that they may have included a range of heterogeneous groups rooted in different geographical contexts and animated by different motives: French evangelicals and *moyenneurs* (Turchetti 1984; Causse 1986; Wanegffelen 1995, 1997); Italian heretics (Caponetto 1974; Simoncelli 1979; Firpo 1984; Turchetti 1987; Cantimori 1992; Garavelli 2004; Firpo 2007); Dutch spirituals (Eire 1986); and also (though to a lesser extent) German Protestants (Eire 1986). In Germany, Calvin’s work intersected with that of homegrown Protestant leaders such as Wolfgang Musculus, whose 1549 polemical dialogue *Proscærus* – written in the aftermath of the Augsburg Interim of 1548 and rapidly translated into French (*Le temporiseur*, 1550) and English (*The Temporisour*, 1555) – addressed issues of compromise and

dissimulation much in the same vein as Calvin’s anti-Nicodemite writings did (Ginzburg 1970).

Innovative and Original Aspects

One aspect that has come to the fore thanks to the aforementioned studies is the Europe-wide significance that Calvin’s anti-Nicodemite writings were intended to have – and did in fact have. Looking at the Nicodemite controversy from a transnational perspective sheds some helpful light on the long-debated question of Nicodemism’s origins, a question that has traditionally been addressed from a national (not to say nationalistic) perspective. For the Italian scholar Delio Cantimori, whose groundbreaking studies contributed to creating Nicodemism as an object of study in the mid-twentieth century (Cantimori 1959a, b, 1992), Nicodemism was an essentially Italian phenomenon, tied to the particular conditions of religious life in the peninsula during and after the Council of Trent (1545–1563). While Cantimori’s position was subsequently adopted and developed by a number of scholars (Rotondò 1967; Caponetto 1974; Simoncelli 1979), it did not encounter unanimous consensus. Alternative views included Albert Autin’s franco-centric narrative (1910), also followed by Eugénie Droz (1970–1976) and Maurice Causse (1986) and Carlo Ginzburg’s ingenious thesis of a German birth of Nicodemism, expounded in a field-changing monograph of 1970. Here Ginzburg argued that something very close to the theoretically justified dissembling behavior denounced by Calvin in the 1540s had already taken shape among the German Anabaptists in the aftermath of their crushing defeat in the Peasants’ War of 1524–1525. According to Ginzburg, at the origins of the Nicodemite movement was a German botanist of heretical inclinations named Otto Brunfels. Brunfels’s writings contain references to the same scriptural passages on which the later generation of Nicodemites targeted by Calvin allegedly based its defense of religious dissimulation – including the notorious episode of Nicodemus in John 3:1–15, as well as various passages from the Old Testament and from Paul’s Epistles.

Ginzburg's approach was to some extent a continuation of that of Cantimori, in that it similarly implied the rejection of Calvin's identification of the Nicodemites with the crypto-Reformed and replaced it with a counter-genealogy that emphasized the heretical matrix of Nicodemism. Like Cantimori, Ginzburg portrayed Nicodemism as a conduct typically adopted by nonconformist groups pursuing heterodox forms of religious spirituality that made them unwelcome to the established churches on both sides – the Roman Catholic as well as the Protestant in its many forms. By shifting the focus from Italy to Germany, however, Ginzburg was not simply replacing one national narrative with another, as previous scholars had generally done; he was also moving past it, highlighting the existence of deeper commonalities between Italian and German heretical movements tied to the history of religious dissimulation (1970: 159–181), as well as suggesting possible links with the French side of the story (1970: 182–205).

Ginzburg's thesis has since been criticized on many levels (Biondi 1974; Eire 1979, 1986). One particularly penetrating critique (Bietenholz 1990) has taken issue with Ginzburg's adoption of selected elements from Calvin's portrait of the Nicodemite (*viz.*, the use of specific scriptural passages as arguments for religious dissimulation) as a heuristic framework for identifying Nicodemite tendencies *before* Calvin. In addition to flagging this retroactive fallacy, Bietenholz raises crucial methodological questions regarding the legitimacy of relying on negative descriptions derived from polemical sources (such as Calvin's portrait of the Nicodemite in his anti-Nicodemite writings) for modern historiographical work.

Other aspects of Ginzburg's work on Nicodemism proved more fruitful and long-lived. His 1970 monograph, in particular, paved the way to a "transnational turn" in the study of Nicodemism, which encouraged later investigations of Nicodemism as a unified, though far from monolithic, pan-European phenomenon – one whose geographical and chronological boundaries far exceed the span of the original Nicodemite controversy of the 1540s–1550s

(Biondi 1974; Bietenholz 1990; Cavaillé 2012b; Wanegffelen 2013). As a result of these new research trends, the last few decades have seen a deep transformation of the scholarly debate on Nicodemism. In the last 20 to 30 years, scholars have stretched the term Nicodemism well beyond its context of origin, in ways that ultimately reflect underlying disagreements about the meaning and essence of Nicodemism itself. Nicodemite attitudes have been ascribed to a number of individuals and groups active in different historical contexts, such as Catholics in Elizabethan England (Pettegree 1996; Tutino 2006), Marranos and Moriscos in early modern Spain (Firpo 1994; Schwartz 2008), and religiously heterodox thinkers such as Jean Bodin and Isaac Newton (Quaglioni 1984; Snobelen 1999). In some cases, the very notion of Nicodemite has been thoroughly reconceptualized so as to include not only strategic dissemblers waiting for more favorable circumstances to declare their true faith but also a wide range of non-aligned religious groups permanently resisting confessional polarization in the so-called age of confessionalization. Following up on earlier work by Carlo Ginzburg (1970) and Mario Turchetti (1984), both of whom identified connections between Nicodemite practice and a certain penchant for adiaphorism, irenicism, and religious compromise, some scholars have proposed to use Nicodemism as an umbrella concept for all those who "chose not to choose" in a world characterized by increasing religious tension and polarization (Wanegffelen 1997, 2013; Cavaillé 2012b). In its most radical form, this approach changes the very essence of what we mean by Nicodemism: in this view, what defines Nicodemism in the first instance is not so much the practice of religious dissimulation (whether theoretically informed or not) but rather a particular understanding of the Christian faith (already advanced by thinkers like Erasmus, Juan de Valdés, and Martin Luther) that places more importance on interiority than exteriority, thus reducing the importance of rites and other forms of public display of one's faith (Belladonna 1980a; Bietenholz 1990; Firpo 1990).

Impact and Legacy

One consequence of the semantic expansion of Nicodemism in recent scholarship is that the term can now be used to think cohesively about the many forms of (and disputes about) dissimulation and nonconformity that arose in various places and at various times in early modern Europe. While the extent to which the term Nicodemism may legitimately be generalized beyond its context of origin remains an open question (Biondi 1974), reappraising the Nicodemite phenomenon as part of broader debates about secrecy, (dis)simulation, and “ways of lying” (Zagorin 1990, Pettigree 1996; Cavaillé 2009; Snyder 2009; Eliav-Feldov 2012) – as well as part of a general reaction to institutional attempts at disciplining the inner life of individuals (Prosperi 2009) – has enabled scholars to better appreciate the place of Nicodemism in early modern European culture at large. (For a rich, though not exhaustive, bibliography of scholarship on Nicodemism, see Cavaillé 2012a.)

Such broader, contextual approach to Nicodemism is not only heuristically productive but can also be defended on historical grounds. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, dissimulation was a topic debated in a number of fields, ranging from religion to politics, ethics, and aesthetics (Belladonna 1975, 1980b; Ascoli 1999). While it is certainly important to determine what (if anything) sets Nicodemism apart from other forms of dissimulation, it must also be acknowledged that a clear distinction between different types or degrees of dissembling behavior was not always made in the early modern period. At times of intensified civil tension, such distinctions were often deliberately obscured for polemical purposes: during the French civil wars of the later sixteenth century, for instance, Huguenot and Catholic pamphleteers took turns conflating classic anti-Nicodemite commonplaces with a harsh condemnation of “Machiavellian” simulation (Battista 1962; Vivanti 1963; Lastraioli 2009).

More attention to the ways in which dissimulation was appropriated as a polemical weapon in

contexts that were simultaneously political and religious would shed much needed light on the afterlife of the Nicodemite controversy in the latter half of the sixteenth century – and beyond. One way to do this would be to examine how the reception of (in)famous texts such as Machiavelli’s *Prince* or Tacitus’s *Annals* (both of which discussed dissimulation as an essential component of statecraft) may have overlapped and interacted with the later circulation of Calvin’s and Musculus’s anti-Nicodemite texts. More generally, reception is an angle from which such debates have rarely been studied, and we can expect significant progress in this area in the future.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Adiaphorism](#)
- ▶ [Catholic Reformation](#)
- ▶ [Confessionalization](#)
- ▶ [Desiderius Erasmus](#)
- ▶ [Dissimulation](#)
- ▶ [French Wars of Religion](#)
- ▶ [Irenicism](#)
- ▶ [Isaac Newton](#)
- ▶ [Jean Bodin](#)
- ▶ [John Calvin \(Jean Calvin\)](#)
- ▶ [Juan de Valdès](#)
- ▶ [Machiavellianism](#)
- ▶ [Martin Luther](#)
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- ▶ [Religion](#)
- ▶ [Secrecy](#)
- ▶ [Spiritualism](#)
- ▶ [Tacitus](#)
- ▶ [Wolfgang Musculus](#)

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