Negotiating the Sacred: Spirituality and Reform in the Age of Enlightenment in the Republic of Venice

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Abstract
The continuing resilience, significance, and variety of religious culture in the age of the Enlightenment in the Republic of Venice are the overarching themes of this dissertation, which consists of a series of case-studies. Though the stories examined here are diverse and cover several aspects of devotions, practices, and beliefs, they all grew out of negotiations that took place at all levels. Each chapter showcases negotiations of the sacred among secular authorities, the clergy and their flocks, bishops and inquisitors, higher office holders in the Roman Church and in local branches of the Inquisition, and various members of ecclesiastic institutions. Together, these represent a more complicated religious Enlightenment than usually envisioned. Negotiations of the sacred unfold against the background of unapologetic quests for the miraculous and divine manifestations. Hence, the pursuit of modernity, which is still seen as the hallmark of the Age of Reason, actually never was very far removed from the sphere of religion and consciousness of the spiritual world. The examination of so many varied aspects of devotion, practices, beliefs, and the numerous uncertain attempts to constrain them within more rigorous boundaries (or to remove them from popular control) during the eighteenth century ultimately confirms that we – “moderns” – are the children of the Enlightenment in more complex ways than we might imagine.

Keywords
Religious Enlightenment; Popular Devotion; Republic of Venice; Sacred Heart; Exorcism; Eighteenth Century Inquisition; Miracles; Negotiations of the Sacred; Cult of the Saints

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The thinkers of the Enlightenment, influenced by the scientific revolutions of the previous century, believed in shedding the light of science and reason on the world in order to question traditional ideas and ways of doing things. The scientific revolution (based on empirical observation, and not on metaphysics or spirituality) gave the impression that the universe behaved according to universal and unchanging laws (think of Newton here). This provided a model for looking rationally on human institutions as well as nature. Reason and equality.

Jean-Jaques Roussaeau, Du contrat social An overview of how the Scientific Revolution catalyzed the Age of Enlightenment with a discussion of the degree to which Enlightenment ideas have or even can be fulfilled. In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus publishes On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres, famous for suggesting that earth is not the center of the universe but that the earth revolves around the sun. What was powerful about this is it challenged centuries old ideas about how the universe worked and at a meta level, it was about using new methods and evidence in order to make conclusions no matter how revolutionary those conclusions might be. And this publication is often cited as the beginning of what will be known as the scientific revolution. The major philosophical movements of the period include British Empiricism, Rationalism and Kantianism. It also saw an increasing focus on Political Philosophy. It was essentially a continuation of the process of rationalization begun in the Age of Reason of the 17th Century, but also to some extent a reaction against it, and the two periods are often combined as the Early Modern period.