

Making Truth in Early Modern Catholicism

Andreea Badea, Bruno Boute, Marco Cavarzere, and Steven Vanden Broecke, eds.
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Making Truth in Early Modern Catholicism is an edited volume containing twelve essays dealing with the concept of truth—and its ‘manufacturing’—in the early modern Catholic world. Besides the papers, a very important contribution to the field is also the programmatic manifesto written by the four editors. ‘Truth’ is the word that stands out in the book title but, as the introduction highlights, even the ‘carved in marble’ reformed world had to deal with uncertainty, doubts, and in-between zones. Catholics, both authorities and the common people, had to find their way and adapt to circumstances, especially in such a globally expanded reality.

The historians and philosophers mentioned in this introduction are many—Michel de Certeau, Bruno Latour, and Pierre Bourdieu among others—and of the utmost importance to understand the scope and perspective of the editors. They wish to adopt an interdisciplinary methodological approach typical not only of historical sciences (mainly religious history and history of knowledge) but also of science studies. This praxeological view is based not on how things should have been (in theory), but on how they were (in real life).

The starting point is the Latin definition of ‘fact’: ‘facta,’ that which is fabricated. Thus, looking for univocal and unambiguous ‘facts’ in history (and also in science, as it has been recently admitted by the scientific community as well) does not make any sense, and even if it would, the fact would not be objective *per se*. What the contributors to this book are looking for is ‘credibility,’ not the truth, and this can be found in sources that ascertain the actual practices: notes of the Roman congregations, letters, petitions, and also fiction.

Another important element of this book is its focus on the plurality of Catholicism(s) around the globe. Studies by Simon Ditchfield and Peter Burke have well demonstrated how there was no single Roman Catholicism during the early modern period. Such a perspective has been adopted by the POLY research group directed by Birgit Emich (‘Polycentricity and Plurality of Premodern Christianities, ca. 700–1800 CE,’ funded by the German Research Foundation [Deutsche

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Forschungsgemeinschaft] and housed at Goethe University Frankfurt), of which two of the editors (Andreea Badea and Bruno Boute) are active members.

The book is divided into three sections corresponding to how the idea of ‘truth’ could be depicted and adapted, with the first one focusing on ‘Accommodating.’ The concept of *accommodatio*, i.e., adapting to local cultures, customs, and languages (if not in clear and open contrast with Catholicism) is well known and associated mainly with the Society of Jesus. However, accommodation practices were necessary for every Catholic, operating both in familiar territories and in the most exotic and distant civilisations. Rome as a central hub is a great starting point for studying the different shades of Catholicism, and clearly, the missionary territories constitute fundamental case studies.

Rudolf Schuessler examines the approaches of the scholarly community toward reasonable disagreements. Controversies of the early modern period brought to the conclusion that, even in the perspective of *una ecclesia*, there was the possibility of the coexistence of multiple opinions, all considered equally ‘probable.’ Marco Cavarzere studies the fascinating case of oaths pronounced by Catholic and non-Catholic parties in commercial relations in the Indies: were the ‘false’ (according to the Roman perspective) gods able to guarantee a trustworthy agreement? Steven Vanden Broecke deals with the study of cosmology in the Habsburg Netherlands, a Catholic enclave where Galileo’s theories were officially condemned, but at the same time, Copernican heliocentrism continued to be taught. Brendan Röder demonstrates how Roman authorities tended to believe more in the *vox populi* than in medical opinion in cases in which clergymen showed impediments (like diseases and mutilations) hindering their pastoral tasks.

The second section is about ‘Performing,’ in the sense of ‘pretending’ but also ‘acting as if:’ it is in this perspective that Boute examines the administration of the sacrament of penance as a performing act. Birgit Emich focuses on beatifications and canonisations, which were totally reformed in the early modern period. These processes first involved legal experts (summoned to judge holy episodes), then religious personalities (such as cardinals), but in the end, the pope was the one and only proclaiming the blessed or saint. Badea uses the example of the potentially dangerous works written by ‘critical’ Catholics (like the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum* and Mabillon’s *Epistola de cultu sanctorum ignotorum*), to show one of the Roman reactions to changes: counterattacking with discrediting campaigns to establish its *auctoritas* in historical-religious matters. Focusing more specifically on the history of science, Maria Pia Donato studies the approaches to sacramental physics in the Eucharist, while Leen Spruit scrutinises the interactions and clashes between philosophical psychology and Roman orthodoxy.

‘Embedding’ is the title of the last section, opened by Vittoria Fiorelli’s essay on the Neapolitan Giacinto del Cristofaro, which clarifies what at the time could be considered ‘atheism’—and as such condemned. Cecilia Cristellon uses the declaration

of Benedict XIV (1741) as a lens to acknowledge the Church's efforts to face what was a common problem of the time, i.e., the marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics or between non-Catholics without sacerdotal attendance. The concluding essay by Rivka Feldhay invites readers to consider early modern history not as a linear path to the progressive autonomy of the religious, political, and scientific fields, but as a stimulating phase in which all of them are intertwined, interdependent, and evolving.

This book is a rich and dense collection of essays looking at / deconstructing 'truth' from complementary perspectives. The scholars involved in the project include historians and philosophers of science, all of them focusing on different sources with different approaches and contributing to answering the fascinating questions posed by the editors in their introduction, which is concluded with a selected bibliography that constitutes a good basis for further studies in this direction. The quality of the contribution is remarkable: clear in its argumentations and wide-spanning, this book creates a fruitful and coherent discussion among scholars studying the early modern period in all its multifaceted complexities.