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Sozzini, Fausto and Lelio

***Born*:** Lelio Sozzini: 29 January 1525, Siena
***Died*:** Lelio Sozzini: 4 May 1562, Zürich
***Born*:** Fausto Sozzini: 5 December 1539, Siena
***Died*:** Fausto Sozzini: 3 March 1604, Lusławice

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Abstract

Lelio and Fausto Sozzini, uncle and nephew, were two of the main exponents of sixteenth-century Antitrinitarianism. Their thoughts, especially Fausto's elaboration of Lelio's suggestions, became a point of reference for both Italian religious dissenters and members of the Minor Reformed Church (*Ecclesia Minor*) in Poland. After Fausto's death (1604), his ideas were spread across Europe by several followers and gave rise to Socinianism, which emerged as one of the most important religious, moral, and philosophical doctrines of early modern times.

Alternate Names

► Socini; ► Socinus

Biography

From the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Sozzini family, based in Siena, was famous in the domain of juridical studies, to such an extent that Pierre Bayle, for instance, dedicated to the illustrious jurisconsult Mariano Sozzini (1401–1467) a specific entry in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Bayle 1740, 4, 226–227). His grandson Mariano Sozzini junior (1482–1556), the father of Lelio and Alessandro, the father of Fausto, continued the family tradition and taught law in Siena, Padua, and Bologna. For this reason, Lelio, who as a child followed his father in Padua and then in Bologna, was supposed to embark on the same career. However, at the beginning of his studies in Padua, he encountered the radical reformed thought that was already widespread in Italy – in Siena with Bernardino Ochino, in Padua with Matteo Gribaldi and Celio Secundo Curione among others – and especially in Veneto, thanks to the (relative) freedom of religion that the Republic of Venice allowed in its territories (Stella 1967). In Padua, and then in Bologna, to which he moved in 1542, Lelio transferred from juridical to theological studies with such passion and devotion that he started to learn Hebrew to read the source of the Scripture (Rotondò's introduction to Sozzini 1986, 27–28). In 1547, after 3 years of religious discussions in the intellectual radical circles of Siena, Padua, and Bologna, Lelio adhered to the Reformation and began to travel across Europe, from the Valtellina to the canton of

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Graubünden, from Basle to France and England, until he reached Geneva and then Zurich (Taplin 2003), where he met John Calvin and Heinrich Büllinger, Zwingli's successor (Cantimori 1939). At this time, probably in 1549 and as a consequence of his discussions with Calvin on the subject, Lelio wrote a treatise on the resurrection of the bodies (*De resurrectione*, Sozzini 1986, 75–80) in which he cast doubt on Calvin's opinions (Sozzini 1986, 321–326). In 1550 he enrolled at Wittenberg University and made acquaintance with Melanchthon. He did not stop there and continued his rise in Wien, Prague, and Kraków, where he made contact with the local Antitrinitarians, such as the physician Giorgio Biandrata. Lelio ceaselessly questioned several Christian standpoints, for example, the role and value of the sacraments (*De sacramentis dissertatio ad Tigurinos and Genevenses,* 1555, Sozzini 1986, 81–92), and also for this reason he was asked by Büllinger for a declaration of faith, which did not completely persuade Calvin and his fellows, despite its coherence with the reformed doctrine (*Confessio fidei*, 1555, Sozzini 1986, 93–100). Besides a short trip for financial reasons in 1552 – the Roman Inquisition had become very interested in Sozzini's family – Lelio remained in voluntary exile for most of his life. In 1559, he arrived for the last time in Zurich, where he wrote, perhaps in 1561, his most important work – *Brevis explicatio in primum Iohannis caput* (Sozzini 1986, 101–128). He died 3 years later after a wandering life of exchanges and debates with the most important Reformation exponents and dissenters of his time.

Fifteen years younger than Lelio, Fausto was educated in an environment that increasingly mirrored the reformed thought; his uncles Cornelio and Dario had been tried in Rome by the Roman Inquisition for their sympathies toward the Reformation, and there were many suspicions about their brother Celso (Marchetti 1975, chs. XIII, XIV). Nonetheless, Fausto did not seem to have any interest in religious questions during his youth, which he passed dedicating himself to literature and poetry (Sozzini 2005) as a member of the Accademia degli Intronati at Siena, which he joined in 1555 with the name of "Frastagliato" (Sozzini 2004, X). In 1561, Fausto left Italy for Lyon, partly through fear of the Inquisition's increased attention towards Italians who sympathized with the Reformation, and partly in order to handle his economic interests and those of his uncles Celsio, Cornelio, and Camillo, who participated and had titles in Lyon's agency of the Lucca merchants Buonvisi and Micheli (Rotondò 2008, 212). When he learnt that Lelio had passed away, Fausto traveled to Zurich to collect his uncle's papers and then went to Basle, where he encountered Sebastian Castellio and wrote his *Explicatio primae partis primi capitis Evangelistae Johannis*, inspired by Lelio's work (Sozzini 2004, I, 73–85). Between 1563 and 1575, Fausto lived in Italy, under the protection of the Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici and, from 1574, of Francesco I. From 1569 to 1573, he worked as a secretary for Paolo Giordano Orsini and his wife Isabella de' Medici, who protected him from the suspicions of the Inquisition (Marchetti 1969). Until 1578, he was in Switzerland, where he faced his first two theological discussions, one on the role of Christ in salvation with Jacquet Couvet (*Disputatio de Jesu Christo Servatore*, published in 1594, Sozzini 2004, II, 115–252) and the other with Francesco Pucci on the condition of Adam before the fall (*De statu primi hominis ante lapsum disputatio*, 1610, Sozzini 2004, 253–270). At the end of 1578, Fausto arrived in Transylvania on the invitation of Giorgio Biandrata to argue against the non-adorantist position of the Unitarian Ferencz Dávid (Kot 1937). In 1579, after the death of Dávid, who had been imprisoned because he refused to recant, Fausto arrived in Poland. Here, he soon became the leader of the Minor Reformed Church, the Polish Brethren, mostly because of his sharp discussion skills and moderation of several burning issues, such as the baptism of adults and the relationship between Christians and social and political life (Szczucki 2005; Kot 1957). In 1586, he married Elisabeth Morsztyn, daughter of the nobleman Krysztof who hosted Fausto in Pawlikowice from 1583 to 1587, and in 1587 became father to Agnese, the future mother of Andrzej Wiszowaty (1608–1678). In the same year, Francesco de' Medici died and Fausto lost

his last protection against the Roman Inquisition. Consequently, in 1590, the Holy Office in Siena seized all his assets and from then on Fausto could not count on anything but the support of his father-in-law and his followers (Szczucki 2001). In the final decade of the sixteenth century, Fausto devoted himself to deepening his thoughts on Christ, on the doctrine of atonement, and on the main principles of his faith, and to protecting the Minor Church from attacks by the Jesuits, who were extending their influence in Poland. In 1594, he was assaulted in Kraków, then more violently 4 years later, when some students, perhaps Catholic, broke into his house and destroyed most of his papers and books, among which was a lost treatise on atheism (Pioli 1952, 169–174). This event led Fausto to move from Kraków to the village of Lusławice, where he stayed until his death (3 March 1604), writing the basis of the future Catechism of Raków, published in Polish in 1605 and soon translated into German (1608) and Latin (1609), and several essays on the Church, the Supper, and the New Testament.

Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

The thought of Lelio and Fausto Sozzini belonged to the movement of people and ideas that distinguished the second half of the sixteenth century. As is well known, the Italian situation in relation to the Reformation was extremely peculiar (Firpo 1993): Italian religious dissenters' famous – and discussed – nicodemism (Ginzburg 1970) did not keep them from being identified, controlled, and persecuted by the religious authorities (Rotondò 1967). As a result, most of them were obliged to spend their lives in a more or less voluntary exile in countries like Switzerland or those in East Europe in which the reformed thought seemed not yet wholly constituted, and were therefore more open to discussions and different opinions (Wilbur 1947). In this sense, Lelio and Fausto's lives clearly illustrate the complexity of the networks of dissenters that connected philosophers, theologians, jurists, physicians, and academics across Europe in the sixteenth century (Celati 2018).

With regard to the Italian cultural tradition, it has to be remarked that both Lelio and Fausto were acquainted with the philology of Lorenzo Valla and the Paduan Aristotelianism and thus with the critical attitude towards several aspects of the theological tradition, such as the notion of "persona" or the immortality of the soul (Cantimori 1939; Stella 1983). These elements, along with a sincere and genuine religious sentiment, led Lelio and subsequently Fausto to continuously analyze and discuss the Scripture, looking for a correct, rational reading of those themes that had to their eyes a strict connection with ethical behavior, which according to them was the real scope of God's revelation. In this sense, Lelio, but mostly Fausto, tried to break the deadlock in which the reformed church, especially the Calvinist Church, seemed to be stuck because of its restriction of the interpretation of the Scripture to the pastoral body and its inability to redefine the Christian dogmas aimed at bringing back to light the evangelical message (Marchetti 2005). The first, and probably the main, result of their engagement can be found in the explanations of the prologue of John's Gospel, which, by claiming the humanity of Christ against the metaphysical reading of the *logos*, brought about a rupture in the reformed thought.

Innovative and Original Aspects

The question of the Trinity, of its coherence and its truth, was widely diffused amongst the first generation of reformed thinkers (Biagioni 2016). Lelio and Fausto's novelty lies in their inserting of this topic within a larger discussion on the humanity of Christ. This point, which distinguishes Socinianism from other confessions, was stated in Lelio's *Brevis explicatio* and eventually deepened by Fausto through a particular reading of the well-known *incipit* of John's Gospel "Εν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ Λόγος" ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God") (Rotondò's *Nota critica* in Sozzini 1986, 347ff). According to Lelio and Fausto the "logos" is nothing but the discourse,

the speech of God ("sermo", as Valla and Erasmus had already indicated, and not "verbum" as traditionally stated – Domański 1974), which was preached by a real, finite, man: Christ. This tenet is confirmed by the sentence "ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο" translated by Lelio and Fausto as "the Word *was* flesh," and not the traditional "the Word became flesh" (Marchetti 2005). In Fausto's opinion, the misunderstanding of the real meaning of John's Gospel was a result of the influence of Plato's philosophy on the Christian doctrine, which had then to be purged of these metaphysical interferences through a historical and philological analysis of the Scripture (Scribano 2007). A different translation was also proposed by Fausto for the Gospel's opening words "In the beginning," which in Sozzini's opinion could not mean "from eternity" since Christ, being a man, did not preexist the creation. These words indicated only the starting point of human history, of the road to salvation that Christ showed us through his behavior and his preaching (*De Jesu Christo Servatore*, Sozzini 2004, II, 119–246). This does not imply that Christ must not be venerated: on the contrary, as Fausto clearly explained in *De Jesu Christi invocatione disputatio* against Dávid (1579), since Christ received from God the supreme power over human beings, we have to give him the divine worship. In this sense, Christ is our savior not because his death was the atonement for human sins – which are individual and personal – but because by resurrecting he revealed the right way to trust in God (Osier 1996). As we read in the Catechism, to trust in God means to obey him, and therefore to act according to the ethics preached by Christ. As a result, in the Socinian view, there is no distinction between faith and works (Crell et al. 1680, chap. 9, sec. 6), which can be accomplished through the intact freedom of human beings. As Fausto argued against Francesco Pucci (*De statu primi hominis ante lapsum*, Sozzini and Pucci 2010; Biagioni 2005), the reward for following God's word is to become immortal, returning to the condition of Adam before the sin and of Christ after his death. Such interpretations of the Scripture were attained by Fausto through a peculiar form of rationalism, which intended to read the Bible by means of a critical and rational analysis that showed and refused the illogical dogmas supported by the tradition, dogmas such as the Trinity (Ogonowski 1974), the infinity of God (Angelini 2017), the predestination, the original sin (Simonutti 2005b), and the creation *ex nihilo* (*Praelectiones theologicae*, Sozzini 2004, 585). In Fausto's account, human reason is perfectly adequate for the task of understanding religious truths, which can be above reason, but never contrary to it (Salatowsky 2015). However, as Fausto wrote in *De Sacra Scripturae Auctoritate* (Sozzini 2004, I, 263–284), the source of religious truths is the sole Scripture in which, therefore, all we need to be saved can be found (Cantimori 1939). Moreover, according to Fausto, what is important for salvation is not really a set of specific doctrines, but rather the ethical message praised by Christ. As a consequence, Fausto not only considered the number of doctrines that must be professed as very limited, but also created the conditions for a notion of tolerance that became, in the seventeenth century, the distinctive feature of the Socinian movement (Pintacuda de Michelis 1975; Ogonowski 2005).

Impact and Legacy

From the beginning of the seventeenth century, because of the rise of counter-reformation and as a consequence of the 30 Years' War, the Polish Socinians, the followers of Fausto, found themselves in a difficult situation. The first wave of persecutions reached a climax in 1638 with the destruction of the Socinian center at Raków, "the Sarmatian Athens" (Williams' introduction to Lubieniecki 1995), which hosted a school and a printer house. Twenty years later, in 1658, a decree imposed on all "Arians" demanded that they leave Poland by July 1660, giving rise to the Socinian diaspora (Wilbur 1947). Most of the Socinians fled to Holland (Bayle 1740, 4, 228–237), where their writings had circulated since the 1580s, despite the prohibition of the Dutch States General (Külher 1912), and they were received favorably by the Arminians

(Mulsow and Rohls 2005). In 1668 – but with the evocative date "after 1656" in order to remember John II Casimir's vote to expel Unitarians from the country (Wilbur 1947) – in Amsterdam – renamed Irenopolis, "Peace City" – Andrzej Wiszowaty promoted the publication of the most important works of the Polish Brethren, the *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum* (Kuyper et al. 1668), whose first two volumes contained the writings of Fausto Sozzini. The publication of *Bibliotheca* increased the debate and the circulation of Socinian thought, which became a synonym for every form of religious rationalism. This reading did not depend only on the polemical interpretation of Socinianism driven by its opponents, but also on the positions held by the second generation of Socinians: Johachim Stegmann (1595–1633) and Andrzej Wiszowaty, for instance, in their books *De iudice and norma controversiarum* (1644) and *Religio Rationalis* (1676–1678) stated that reason is the sole judge in theological controversies (Salatowsky 2017). As has been noted, this attitude deeply influenced the thought of philosophers such as John Locke (Simonutti 2005a; Marshall 2000) and Isaac Newton (Snobelen 2005) and has been viewed as a source of eighteenth-century Deism (Israel 2006). The history of Socinian rationalism clearly shows the changes that occurred from the times of Fausto Sozzini: in fact, although Sozzini was diffident towards systematic and rational theology, his followers, from Johann Crell (1590–1633) to Noël Aubert de Versé (1645?–1714), attempted to build up an organized set of doctrines that they hoped would become a real alternative to the great philosophies of the seventeenth century (Scribano 2005).

Cross-References

- ▶ Anabaptism
- ▶ Calvin, Jean
- ▶ Curione, Celio Secundo
- ▶ Nicodemism
- ▶ Ochino, Bernardino
- ▶ Philology
- ▶ Socinianism

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