

## **Censorship and the ecclesiastic hierarchy's attitude towards educated culture and uneducated culture**

**Giorgio Caravale**

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### **abstract**

I intend to reconsider the subject of censorship starting from the different attitude adopted by the ecclesiastic hierarchy towards educated culture, on the one hand, and towards uneducated culture, on the other. The belief that a book might exist that was suitable for all social levels and that any assessment of a book's readability depended on the moral qualities of the readers and to an even greater extent on their cultural level clearly are apparent in many ecclesiastic sources of the day. One of the main aims of the seminar is to discuss the way this principle was expressed in terms of political censorship by Rome. The hypothesis that will be tested is that, in cultural terms, such censorship inflicted its severest damage on the ignorant and illiterate, i.e. on social categories that were unfamiliar with Latin and were unacquainted with both courts and academy alike. For a number of reasons - an efficient book licensing system that took an applicant's cultural level into account, the existence of a network of influential protectors at the Curia and also at the political level, and the greater measure of tolerance shown by the censors towards indubitably Catholic writers - Italian intellectuals and élite were able to read practically any book, even in unexpurgated versions, thus suffering only to a limited extent the effects of the privations imposed by Rome. The climate of cultural oppression affected the mindset of intellectuals and their moral fibre rather than their actual opportunities of accessing important areas of Italian and European literature. Nevertheless, what took place in the life of the so called "semplici et indotti" was something much more radical than a mere change in their cultural outlook and mental attitude. The banning of those religious and literary texts which for centuries had nourished their faith in God may be seen as an existential trauma. "I swore never to read any more", were the words of the cobbler Domenico di Spilimbergo to his inquisitors in 1574: twenty-five years had passed since the beginning of censorship and he had been deprived of the only three books he possessed: the Orlando Furioso, the Decameron and a copy of the New Testament. The belief expressed by the influential cardinal Silvio Antoniano towards the end of the sixteenth century, that "the good Christian need not curiously seek knowledge above his understanding, but must simply believe what our holy Mother Church puts forward" aptly summarizes the guidelines of that crusade for the infantilization of the common people which the Counter-Reformation Church so tenaciously pursued.