

Unveiling the Religious Heart of Venice: Exploring How Venetians' Christian Religion Impacted Everyday Life

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Christianity was undoubtedly one of the key aspects of Venetian life that guided every personal, social, and political decision during the Renaissance Period. Christianity went beyond mere belief, demonstrating how its faith served as the fundamental lens through which Venetians interpreted the world. From attributing the city's success to God's favour to interpreting triumphs and disasters as divine messages, religion permeated every aspect of the Venetian society. Religious symbols like the Lion of St. Mark also embodied both political power and faith. The church and state were closely intertwined, with priests managing aspects of daily life and religious institutions playing a vital role in social welfare and the lives of ordinary citizens. By examining the connection between the Venetian society and its Christian beliefs, this essay will highlight how religion was not just a belief system, but the foundation upon which Venice's political, social, and cultural identity was built.

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Why was Religion so Important?

Venice was a devout Christian state throughout the Renaissance period. Authors like Marin Sanudo described the essence of Christian beliefs in Venetian politics, economics, and social life. Marin Sanudo was a Venetian diarist who documented Venetian life in detail in fifty-eight volumes of writing (LSW, 2008/1536, p. xxvii). Sanudo credited the idea of a successful and hopeful Venetian government to its Christian beliefs. In 1517, Marin Sanudo (in LSW, 2008) claimed that the Venetian Republic survived for more than one thousand years because it was founded by Christians and built up by excellent laws. Sanudo emphasized that after Venice's loss of the battle of Agnadello in 1509, "nevertheless, through the grace of Our Lord and our good administration, our empire was recovered, and it will long endure and increase" (p. 16). This Venetian diarist attributed the city's social, political, and cultural success and recovery amidst trials to God.

The geographic and physical foundation of Venice was also attributed to the Christian belief in God by various authors. George of Tre-

bizond (in Krayer 1997/1450) said that Venice was established in the will of God and that "no one who has ever seen Venice will deny that this state was established amid the sea in a way that was beyond human wealth and design: it came into being not by human counsel but by the will of God, not by the judgment of men but by divine providence" (p. 132). Venetians lived up to this assumption by consistently attributing everything that happened in the state to the wrath or favor from God.

Trials and Symbols of Venice

In May 1509, tensions between Venice and a group of European and Italian powers namely France, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, Hungary, and Ferrara arose (LSW, 2008, p. xxxi). This was six months after these powers formed the League of Cambrai to resist Venice's expansion in northern Italy. The French army was by the Adda river when it defeated the Venetian mercenary force and the news quickly spread such that the Ducal Palace was filled within an hour by patricians and other people. "No one would ever have imagined that the Venetian mainland state could be lost and destroyed

within fifteen days, as we have now seen,” wrote Girolamo Priuli (in LSW, 2008/1412, p. xxxi). The loss of this battle degraded the most serene city of Venice in various ways and ultimately uncovered how much their Christian beliefs laid a foundation for their success and hope.

Due to the temporary loss of its mainland territories, the Venetian Republic needed to supplement the missing income. This led to the acceleration of corruption through the sale of offices, including procuratorship, the highest office next to that of the doge. These corrupt practices defiled the Christian beliefs that Venetians were supposed to hold. For example, Sanudo (in LSW, 2008/1515) complained that the members of the Great Council unfairly gave more votes to wealthy senior patricians than other experienced or worthy nobles solely because the members of the governing body wanted more money. “They are concerned with nothing else except getting those who loan money elected; neither age nor great service matters,” complained Sanudo (p. 272). Authors like Marin Sanudo discuss how these actions that were contrary to Venice’s Christian beliefs consequently led to the destruction of important physical and symbolic features of the Venetian Republic.

Venetians utilized different forms of symbolism to visualize and fully perceive the state. In 1967, Michael Waltzer suggested that the abstract nature of the state requires that it is represented through symbols. Waltzer argues that “the state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived” (p. 194). In Venice, Christianity serves as a powerful visual and symbolic force, intertwined with the state’s political, economic, and religious identities. The splendour of government halls, relics in different areas, and grand religious festivities contributes to the visual representation of the Venetian Republic.

According to Marin Sanudo, in a Collegio meeting the morning of January 20, 1517 (LSW, 2008), the news of the reacquisition of the territory of Verona from the French emperor brought immense relief and joy to Venice. The

lion of St. Mark would once again rule Verona and was displayed as a symbol of Venice’s political and religious identity and prowess. This winged lion represented the city’s patron saint, St. Mark the Evangelist. This symbol transcended religious significance as it held cultural value in the procession on this day. “A number of stone images of the lion of St. Mark that had been buried [for safekeeping] were carried in procession in the church... The truth has risen up from the earth, and justice has looked down from the heavens,” commented Sanudo (p. 95). The lion of St. Mark on this day was a symbol of victory and divine intervention.

The Feast of Ascension Day, known as *Sensa* in Venice, was a major religious festival of the Republic of Venice. It coincided with the day of Christ’s ascension to heaven forty days after His death and resurrection (Arianna, 2017). Ascension Day, according to Pier Paolo Vergerio (in Krayer, 1997/1403), was the most important feast of the Venetian calendar for both religious reasons and economic prestige. Vergerio mentioned that the doge along with other high officials arrived at the waterfront on a boat for this festival. This festival was important because “it is customary for the doge to take a ring from his finger and throw it into the sea, as a sign of Venetian sovereignty and also as a means of ensuring that the republic will continue to possess this sovereignty in the future” (p. 121). Beyond sovereign possession, *Sensa* also held strong religious value (CP, 1992/1480). In the past, on Ascension Day, a palmful of blood flowed from the breast of Christ on crucifix after a desperate gambler stabbed it. According to Santo Bracca, this drew large crowds of Venetians bearing candles. The crucifix remains on display granting a “plenary indulgence” for sins (p. 21).

Unfortunately, consequent to the battle of Agnadello, Sanudo (in CP, 1997/1509) highlighted the impact of the war on Ascension Day. Sanudo claimed that the loss of the battle was a punishment from God for the sins of the Venetians because “it was Ascension Day, but everyone had been weeping, almost no foreigners had come, nobody had been seen in the Piazza, the father

figures of the Collegio were at a complete loss, and even more so our Doge, who said nothing and was like a dead man and wretched” (p. 75).

According to the diaries of Marin Sanudo (in CP, 1992/1511, pp. 188-189) the huge earthquake in 1511 was also believed to be a punishment for Venice’s sins. The subsequent actions of Venetian leaders showed how important religious rituals were seen to appease God’s anger. This powerful earthquake struck Venice one Wednesday afternoon and caused panic and damage. Buildings trembled, canals dried, and bells rang on their own. The Senate meeting erupted in chaos, and landmarks like St. Mark’s and the Doge’s Palace suffered damage. “Venice, beware, and learn to be wise in these times, which are days of evil; take no false step as you did two years ago, for if you fail to rule yourselves with prudence this commonwealth may suffer great loss; and just as St. Mark stayed intact above the Palace, even so, will this city remain faithful to Jesus Christ, and be the preserver of the Catholic faith and the defender of the Church,” warned Sanudo (p. 189).

Following this earthquake in March 1511, Don Antonio Contarini, Venice’s Patriarch (in CP, 1992/1511, p. 189), attributed the disaster to the city’s moral decay and sinful nature. He blamed widespread sodomy and a general neglect of religious practices. He argued that the city had strayed from its duties by allowing a decline in church attendance, confessions, and even the delivery of Lent sermons. The Doge and the council agreed with the Patriarch and pledged to address these issues by acting against blasphemy and sodomy through ordered sermons and fasts. All these examples illustrated how dreadful situations often led Venetians back to their Christian beliefs. Church pulpits were then used as mass media to spread state policies as preachers openly discussed the sins that caused the disaster and urged the people to repent through their sermons (CP, 1992, p. 186). “Hence all the preachers appointed to the churches were ordered to preach, with effect from tomorrow morning, and the Patriarch ordered a three-day fast on bread and water and a procession around the public squares in the evenings, singing the litanies, with one at St Mark’s in the mornings,” remarked Sanudo (in CP, 1992/1511, p. 189).

The Relationship Between Church and State

According to the censuses of 1586 and 1593, about 3 per cent of the population of Venice could be classified as secular or regular clergy or as nuns (CP, 1992, p. 186). Venice was divided into six districts, called sestieres. Each district had several parishes led by priests. This allowed the government to charge priests with tasks that impacted the everyday lives of Venetians. Like political elections, parish priests were elected by ballot by those who have property in the parish, and then the election is reported and confirmed by the Pope in Rome. “The appointment is for life and the superior authority is the most reverend Patriarch,” described Sanudo (in CP, 1992/1493, p. 15). This made the religious component of Venice relatively function as a self-governed entity. In 1529, Sanudo (in CP, 1992) claimed that priests impacted state economic activities particularly in assisting the poor and thus contributing to the everyday lives of Venetians. Yearly, parish priests assembled their parishioners to elect two nobles, a citizen, and artisan who would promote the well-being of the poor to prevent any offence to God. “They shall ensure that every year a voluntary tax is requested in their parish, and this tax shall be applied to the use of the poor,” added Sanudo (p. 305).

Rialto Fire

Marin Sanudo (in LSW, 2008/1514) described the Rialto Fire that occurred in 1514. He said that the fire caused destruction of warehouses and vaults full of merchandise, monasteries, and offices along the Grand Canal in the Rialto, the “most important and richest spot in Venice” (p. 344). Sanudo said that this was “the most dreadful and horrifying thing that was ever seen in Venice or anywhere else” (p. 347). While the fire burned all night and day in all of Rialto, Sanudo speculated that the power of God spared the first church built in Venice. “Only the church of San Giacomo di Rialto, with its leaden roof, remained standing, even though it was in the middle of the fire; so it was God’s wish that it be spared,” remarked Sanudo (p. 344). Sanudo (in LSW, 2008/1514) described how Venetians

had strong beliefs in God's wrath against their evil doing and attributed this fire to God's punishment. "Indeed, it seems as though these fires have been preordained: God has brought them upon us as punishment for our sins and the injustices committed," reflected Sanudo (p. 335).

According to Sanudo (in LSW, 2008/1514), Venetians practiced religious procedures amidst the fire in the hope of relieving the fire. "The parish priests of the churches at Rialto-San Giacomo, San Zuane Evanzelista, and San Matto-carried the body of Christ around Rialto [to try to stop the fire]," said Sanudo (p. 345). The head of St. Barbara kept in one of the churches was also carried in a procession around the burning areas in the hope of stopping the fire. Both procedures however did not work. Despite no avail, the strong Christian beliefs Venetians held played a big role in the initiatives they pursued in difficult times. Venetians interpreted everything that happened in their state through the lens of their Christian faith.

Religious Lay Confraternities

All people excluding nobles and priests could be part of religious confraternities. These confraternities were split into the *arti* and the *scuole*. The *arti* had religious and secular goals while the *scuole* emphasised religious goals. The secular goals aimed to regulate and protect trade in Venice. Religious goals consisted of people coming together to honor saints, praying for one another's souls for eternity, and to assist each other in times of distress (CP, 1992, p. 280). These *scuole* played a significant role in how Venetian men lived their everyday lives acknowledging and living for eternity determined by their Christian beliefs. For example, according to rule book of the charcoal-bearers which was one of the *scuole* (in CP, 1992/1479), a new member was required to "kiss the cross so that God may receive him into the benefits of eternal life" (p. 285). This illustrated the consistent intention of Venetian men to aspire to dedicate their lives to Christian beliefs.

Venetian patricians sought membership in the *scuole* in preparing for the afterlife because it

offered powerful prayers believed to benefit the souls of deceased members (in LSW, 2008, p. 315). Strict approval by the Council of Ten only accepted noblemen whilst on their deathbeds. For instance, ser Lorenzo Zustinian, after acceptance of entry into the *scuole* of the flagellants by the Council of Ten had the Passion read to him whilst he was very ill (in LSW, 2008, p. 315).

Hospital Governance

"Everybody knows that the preservation of our religious institutions is of the greatest credit, benefit, and advantage to this our city," stated a decree of the Great Council in 1538 (in CP, 1992/1538, p. 309). Earlier in 1487, a letter issued by Pope Innocent VIII from Rome (in CP, 1992) described a proposal of the construction of a hospital in Venice that "should be built in a style worthy of it and, once erected, should be maintained and preserved and be visited and held in due veneration by the faithful in Christ" (p. 307). The maintenance of this Venetian hospital relied on the preservation of religious institutions. The letter by Pope Innocent VIII illustrated that the Christians were obliged in sustaining the hospital because "the faithful might be seen to benefit more abundantly in the hospital by this gift of heavenly grace, he [Pope Sixtus IV] granted and bestowed a plenary remission and indulgence for all their sins upon all faithful persons who had truly repented... and should offer assistance in the building of the hospital... as well as in the sustenance and nourishment of the aforesaid poor persons" (p. 307). Upholding religious institutions meant ensuring that Venetians give money with the goal of purchasing indulgences.

In April 1529, a Senate decree (in CP, 1992) emphasized the significance of general poor relief by religious institutions. "Charity is, without any doubt, to be considered the most important form of good works and must always be practiced towards our neighbours... These things we must do in order to please our supreme and almighty God" (pp. 303-304). "The poor of the city must be divided and distributed among the parishes in such a way that each parish has a number of

poor appropriate to its wealth and standing,” stated the Senate’s decree in 1529 (p. 305). To maintain this, parish priests reported Christ’s business to the most reverend Monsiglio Patriarch monthly and they spoke of the poor during every festival day to inspire their congregations. “The preachers appointed to preach for the time being shall be charged warmly to urge the people and earnestly to exhort the well-to-do [potenti] to help the poor, and to encourage all suitable and proper persons to exert themselves and to promote the present ordinance concerning the poor,” emphasised the Senate’s decree (p. 305).

Parish priests continuously played a big role in Venetians everyday lives. For instance, Sanudo (in CP, 1992/1529, p. 306) says that priests strictly oversaw the lives of the poor. “No poor person may depart from one parish to go and reside in another without a certificate from his parish priest, which must be presented to the priest of his new parish, so that such action may be taken concerning these persons who change places as the priest and deputies may judge best,” commented Sanudo.

Summary

Religion was more than a singular aspect of life in Renaissance Venice, but the fundamental lens through which Venetians understood their world and lived their everyday lives. From attributing their city’s very foundation and success to God’s will, to interpreting suffering as divine punishments and victories as signs of favor, religion existed in every aspect of Venetian life. Religious symbols like the lion of St. Mark represented political power and faith, while grand festivals and rituals held great patriotic, social, and economic significance. Even destructive events like earthquakes were seen as divine warnings, prompting religious reformation and corrections among congregations. The Church and State were closely intertwined, with priests even managing aspects of daily life, and religious institutions like confraternities that provided social support and reinforced Christian values. Lastly, upholding religious practices and institutions was crucial for maintaining God’s favor and se-

curing indulgences, showcasing how deeply Venetian society and forward thinking was shaped by Christian beliefs. For further study, looking into how the inflow of foreign religious beliefs would introduce an interesting lens for how Venetians sustained or changed their beliefs.

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