

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

*The Second Generation of the
‘Sambin Revolution’: New Writings
on the Humiliati*

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Until recently, the Humiliati of northern Italy have not been fortunate in their historiography. If they are known to Anglo-phone medievalists, it is usually in walk-on parts, either as the heretics condemned in the bull *Ad abolendam* at the Council of Verona in 1184, or as the pious enthusiasts, precursors of the mendicants, who were recognised and approved by Innocent III in 1201. Although they went on to play a prominent role in many north Italian regions, the later history of the Humiliati has frequently been treated with indifference, except perhaps by those interested in the development of the north Italian wool industry. This is partly because, unlike their contemporaries the Waldensians, the Humiliati did not have to keep defending themselves: their orthodoxy was not long questioned and they became part of the backbone of the religious communities of north Italian cities, taken for granted and largely untrumpeted. Their lack of ‘history’ also reflects the failure of the order to survive the Counter-Reformation. When one of the brethren, objecting strongly to attempts by Carlo Borromeo to reform their much decayed houses, tried quite literally to shoot the messenger, the male order was abruptly disbanded and most of the sources for their communities were dispersed. They thus lack either the later brethren interested in the origins of their own congregation who have so often driven the history industry of other religious orders, or a convenient body of sources on which to base such work.

This negative statement is not a rejection of all previous work on the subject. In the eighteenth century a Jesuit scholar, Girolamo Tiraboschi, produced three careful and extensive Latin volumes, the *Vetera humiliatorum monumenta* (Milan 1766–8), which pieced together a vast amount of information and remains a fundamental resource. However, in this

century the standard work on the Humiliati has been an idiosyncratic volume produced by Luigi Zanoni in 1911.¹ Zanoni's energetic researches in the archives uncovered much new material, but his key conclusions, that the early movement stemmed from the Cathars and was made up of 'proletarian' protesters, were soon challenged, most notably by Herbert Grundmann, who argued that they must have included rich citizens and nobles since otherwise their profession of voluntary poverty would have had little value.² Yet no broad studies replaced his work, and his ideas long continued to resonate.

A new note was sounded in the 1960s and 1970s when Michele Maccarrone and then Brenda Bolton re-examined the relations of the Humiliati with Innocent III in some detail, and Bolton went on to probe and clarify the difficult question of their attitude to evangelical poverty, showing that absolute poverty was never their aim.³ But Bolton herself, in a separate study of the sources for the early Humiliati, acknowledged the difficulties of further enquiry and recommended that future historians should concentrate on 'field work in the humiliati towns'.⁴ When she wrote, there had been one or two pioneering local studies, but little was known of the Humiliati beyond the papal letters and occasional scattered references in narrative sources.

A recent spate of writings on the Humiliati reveals that Italian historians have at last undertaken to fill the void. On the basis of exhaustive research in the notarial and other archival sources, a range of articles and books has appeared which amounts to a veritable revolution in our understanding of the early Humiliati. The driving force behind these works has been the interest and energy of a group of Italian scholars who, although not all students of Sambin personify the rigour and enthusiasm of the 'Sambin revolution' in ecclesiastical and religious history identified by Robert Brentano in 1986.⁵ Their scholarly work has by no means been limited to this movement, but their own and their students' work on the Humiliati demonstrates how far the 'revolution' has moved in the last ten years. Giuseppina De Sandre Gasparini in Verona, Lorenzo Paolini in Bologna, Grado Merlo in Turin, have all undertaken initial studies of the Humiliati and supervised the work of

¹ *Gli Umiliati nei loro rapporti con l'eresia, l'industria della lana ed i comuni nei secoli XII e XIII*, Milan 1911, repr. 1971.

² H. Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, Berlin 1935, 2nd edn 1961.

³ M. Maccarrone, 'Riforma e sviluppo della vita religiosa con Innocenzo III', *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* xvi (1962), 29-72; B. M. Bolton, 'Innocent III's treatment of the Humiliati', in C. J. Cuming and D. Baker (eds), *Popular belief and practice* (Studies in Church History viii, 1971), 73-82, and 'The poverty of the Humiliati', in D. Flood (ed.) *Poverty in the Middle Ages* (Franziskaner Forschungen xxvii, 1975), 52-9.

⁴ B. M. Bolton, 'Sources for the early history of the Humiliati', in D. Baker (ed.) *The materials, sources and methods of ecclesiastical history* (Studies in Church History xi, 1974), 125-33.

⁵ R. Brentano, 'Italian ecclesiastical history: the Sambin revolution', *Medievalia et humanistica* n.s. xiv (1986), 189-97.

students in the field.⁶ Antonietta Moretti in Switzerland has produced a definitive catalogue of the Humiliati in the Canton Ticino, whilst at the centre of affairs stands the flagship project headed by Anna Maria Ambrosioni in the Department of Medieval Studies of the Catholic University of Milan. This has now almost completed its task of providing a complete survey of the sources, published and unpublished, for the Humiliati in the Lombardy region.

The results of these studies, which are based on the same type of meticulous and serious archival investigation identified by Brentano, have been emerging over the past decade and the cumulative effect is remarkable. In essence the works divide into two categories, following two different methodologies. In the first group are those which rework the broad analytical framework, re-examining questions such as the attitudes of the Humiliati to work or their origins and dealings with Innocent III. In the second are those which focus on one locality, usually either a city and its *contado* or a particular house and its history. A snap-shot image of the Humiliati in one place (as is always the case with well-executed case-studies) provides information about issues pertinent to the history of the whole.

At all levels, the studies of Maria Pia Alberzoni, a leading member of the Milan group, must take pride of place, both for quantity and for range. Her work on the Humiliati has not been gathered into one volume, and must therefore be traced through a series of articles in periodicals and conference volumes, but her conclusions lie at the centre of the new work on the Humiliati. A volume drawing together her early essays on Franciscan and quasi-Franciscan activities in Milan, *Francescanesimo a Milano* (Milan 1991), illustrated the role of the Humiliati within the ambit of the friars and shows that her interest in them stretches back to the 1970s when she first published her study of a noble Milanese religious, Floriana Crivelli.⁷ In this she wrestled for the first time in print with one of the horrors of Humiliati history: trying to unravel the maze of notarial inconsistencies and later historical traditions to establish whether or not a particular community (S. Maria di Cantalupo in the pieve of Parabiago, founded by Floriana) had any ties with the order. The answer, as so often, highlights the difficulties but cannot be conclusive.

Since then, Alberzoni has moved on to examine the origins of the Humiliati, reassessing both the old legends associating the first of them with St Bernard and the precise nature of the letters issued by Innocent III. Here she provides the first real novelties in our understanding. She has argued effectively that the long-discounted ties with Bernard might not be entirely legendary, but grounded in family associations with a founding

⁶ G. G. Merlo, 'Tra "vecchio" e "nuovo" monachesimo (metà xii–metà xiii secolo)', *Studi storici* xxviii (1987), 447–69.

⁷ 'Floriana Crivelli fondatrice di S Maria di Cantalupo: contributo per la storia degli Umiliati in Milano', *Ricerche storiche sulla Chiesa ambrosiana* vii (1977), 76–94, repr. in *Francescanesimo a Milano* as ch. v.

member of the order in Milan, Guido da Porta Orientale. She has also suggested that the need to emphasise an association with so prestigious a figure as Bernard is to be explained by the critical circumstances of the Tertiaries of the order in the fourteenth century, already in serious decline. What is even more important, she has provided corrections to the PL edition of Innocent's letter *Licet multitudini* addressed to the Humiliati in 1200. These reveal that the three tiers of the Order were already in existence by this date and lead her to argue that it was the Humiliati themselves who sought to provide a unified structure for the new order, thereby throwing doubts on Maccarrone's assumption that it was all Innocent III's idea. Alberzoni has naturally concentrated above all on the situation in Milan, both out of convenience and because the material there is extraordinarily fruitful. In an article for a volume on charity in Milan ('L'esperienza caritativa presso gli Umiliati: il caso di Brera (secolo xiii)', in M. P. Alberzoni and O. Grassi [eds], *La carità a Milano nei secoli XII–XV*, Milan 1989, 210–23), she has traced the substantial property purchases made by the central Milanese house of the Brera and used these to revitalise an old debate about the charitable activities of the Humiliati. She argues that their purchases were designed to protect the sellers from the dangers of usury, by providing them with the necessary capital to deal with immediate financial difficulties. One may not be entirely convinced that this altruism applied in all cases, but her efforts to change the grounds of debate hint at rewarding new lines of enquiry.

There is a long tradition of collaboration in periodical publications amongst Italian historians and the opportunities these offer for the student of the Humiliati are beautifully demonstrated in a newly established periodical, the *Quaderni di storia religiosa*, edited by a group of historians from Padua and Verona. These volumes are designed to treat one theme systematically each year and have so far dealt with the issue of double houses (1994) and with *Religiones novae* (1995). In the first issue, Alberzoni contributed an article on the nature of the double communities of the Humiliati and the social origins of their recruits ('"Sub eadem clausura sequestrati": uomini e donne nelle prime comunità umiliate lombarde'). Her conclusions are, as always, based largely on Milanese material, but once again she has been cautiously pushing forward the debate. She demonstrates that the hitherto stale controversy about class origins triggered by Zandoni and Grundmann can be revitalised both by acknowledging the variety within one community such as the Brera, which included male brethren from old and new city families alike, and by investigating changes over time (the Brera acquired more 'noble' brothers as the thirteenth century progressed). On a bleaker note, she also demonstrates that the difficulties in establishing the status of Humiliati women, often unnamed in documents listing the men, or included without a second name, remain largely insuperable.

The second volume of the *Quaderni* includes an article (F. Lomastro Tognato and L. Bolcati, 'Una religio nova nel duecento vicentino: gli

Umiliati della città e del contado [sec.XIII]') which falls into my second methodological category, for it focuses on the Humiliati in Vicenza. This much expanded study originated from the 'tesi di laurea' of Bolcati (*Gli Umiliati a Vicenza e nel distretto dal 1260-1270*, supervised by Giuseppina De Sandre Gasparini, 1991-2) and of P. M. Gheno (*Le origini degli Umiliati di Vicenza*, supervised by Antonio Rigon in Padua, 1990-1). By piecing together information about the main houses in Vicenza, a remarkably full picture emerges: large double communities, later acquisition of churches, links with the canons of San Marco, Mantua, gifts from recruits, legacies from friends and relatives, acquisition of property close by and later expansion: the detail is impressive and the differences from, and similarities with, Humiliati elsewhere are occasionally suggested, indicating the possibilities for a wider study. The model for this larger project is undoubtedly the detailed and ground-breaking examination of the Humiliati in Verona and the surrounding area by De Sandre Gasparini, based on careful re-reading of the original *pergamene*, which teases out the links between different individuals and communities, and identifies some of the key players and the close relations between the Humiliati and the canons of San Marco, to whom one of the communities transferred. Some of De Sandre Gasparini's conclusions are summarised in a recent textbook, *La vita religiosa nella Marca veronese-trevigiana tra XII et XIV secolo* (Verona 1993), which includes a convenient series of transcripts of documents to illustrate her themes. (One can only envy the ease with which she assumes that students will read the texts in Latin.)

Undoubtedly the most substantial of the case-studies so far is the volume by Maria Teresa Brolis, *Gli Umiliati a Bergamo nei secoli XIII e XIV* (Milan 1991), a revised version of her doctoral thesis undertaken in Milan in 1986-8. It provides a fine demonstration of the techniques used by these historians. Brolis begins with a careful catalogue of the sixteen houses of the Humiliati in Bergamo (four of which were previously unknown) and the seventeen in the diocese: their position, membership, officers, the sources and remaining quandaries. It is an impressive piece of scholarship, based on arduous combing of the Bergamo and Milan archives and of scattered references in later printed works. The possibilities of these sources are then exploited to the full, allowing a systematic consideration of the (generally cordial) relations of the Humiliati with bishops in the city, their involvement in financial deals (Brolis is inclined to accept Alberzoni's view of these as 'charitable assistance') and city administration (for example as tax collectors or overseers of public works including bridge building), their acquisition of property (frequently from ecclesiastics including the bishop and chapter), and the transformations and crises of the later order. Brolis accepts that more evidence may emerge to enlarge or correct the picture she paints, but her cautious analysis and the extensive appendices and tables, listing houses, their members and superiors as well as sources such as wills, make this an essential tool for all scholars working on the Humiliati.

The research of another member of the Milan team, Renata Crotti Pasi, on Pavia, is summarised in 'Gli Umiliati a Pavia nei secoli xii e xiii: prime indagini', *Bollettino della società pavese di storia patria* (1994), 11–32. This work is on a smaller scale (because less evidence survives) but it has resolved many problems about the Humiliati in the Ticino area. Again, references to individuals and communities are expertly sifted and assessed and, most important of all, the hitherto mysterious community of *Vigalone*, given authority as one of the four senior houses in the letters of Innocent III in 1201, is finally identified. It was at Vialone on the right bank of the river Olona on the road from Pavia to Lodi.

The work of Lorenzo Paolini in Bologna brings us back to the broad paradigmatic approach adopted by Alberzoni and De Sandre Gasparini. However, Paolini approaches the Humiliati from the other side, since his research has centred on the problems and presence of heresy in Italy. In his article 'Le Umiliate al lavoro: appunti fra storiografia e storia', *Bollettino dell'istituto storico italiano per il medio evo e Archivio Muratoriano* xcvi (1991), 229–65, he sets out to re-examine the attitudes of the Humiliati towards work, their sources of inspiration and the practices they adopted. His work acknowledges the difficulties and the provisional nature of any conclusions, but still provides an essential survey of their attitudes to work, which he rightly defines as central to Humiliati spirituality. He recognises that not all houses were involved in the production of wool cloth and suggests that recruitment may have been encouraged both by the variety of work and by the continuity between activities in Humiliati houses and those of secular life. None the less, he concentrates on the wool industry, outlining the methods, the divisions of labour and above all the involvement of Humiliati women in the process.

Like De Sandre Gasparini, Paolini's work has been followed by articles published by some of his own students working on the Bologna area. These are again 'case-studies', often the result of work initially undertaken for 'tesi di laurea'. Thus Ilaria Francica has concentrated on the Humiliati of Bologna ('Gli Umiliati a Bologna nel '200: forme e significato di una *religio* attiva', *Atti e Memorie. Deputazione di storia patria per le province di Romagna* n.s. xlv [1995], 271–93), while Daniela Romagnoli has investigated the situation in Modena ('Gli Umiliati a Modena, xiii/xiv secoli', *Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia* xlvi [1992], 489–526). Both have raised important questions with broader implications for our understanding of the Humiliati. Francica suggests a two-stage transition towards the end of the thirteenth century when the Bolognese Humiliati who had worked wool began to employ others to do the work for them, and then finally became landowners. This raises an interesting contrast with houses in the Milan area, where landowning is well documented early on. Romagnoli, struggling with a lack of documentation for the first decades of the thirteenth century, none the less introduces a range of intriguing points for consideration. She argues that the establishment in Modena owed its origins to an intervention by the Humiliati of Parma

and other Lombard brethren, who imported older and authoritative traditions, and appear as the protagonists in resolving a dispute between the Modenese Humiliati and a failed recruit. She also demonstrates that in the years 1273–82 and 1299–1307 the Humiliati were particularly active in acquiring land and that in 1327 they were identified in city statutes as one of the religious institutions employing ‘tezolani’ to work their fields. She argues both that they were determinedly entrepreneurial, in particular in their acquisition and letting of mills, and that they were involved in supervising the *Consortium pauperum verecundorum*, a variation on their ‘traditional’ role as hospital administrators. She also notes that their employment in city offices such as the treasury coincided with ‘Guelf’ regimes. Brolis found similar evidence for Bergamo, and the two cases raise serious questions about previous conclusions that the social class of the Humiliati and their detachment from the ruling groups offered a guarantee of impartial administration, free from factional influence.

Such works are a show-case for the best in modern Italian scholarship. The authors remain very aware of historiographical traditions, often disproving the pet theories of early antiquarians and correcting or confirming with minute concern for detail. Their labours put flesh on what was otherwise a skeletal history, often enabling us to identify where the houses of the Humiliati were and to determine whether they belonged to the clerical, monastic or lay orders; they provide information on the property they owned, perhaps the numbers in a house and the names of the superiors; and even, sometimes, permit a glimpse of their internal life. They are based on formidably detailed scholarship, indeed sometimes the detail is well-nigh overwhelming, so that one can read the footnotes with profit and enjoyment almost without reference to the main text.

The drawback to such a revolution in the material available has been the way it raises awareness of the gaps that remain: for example, much more needs to be said about the early years of the Humiliati and their relations with orthodoxy. The exceptionally full picture produced in Brolis’s study of Bergamo whets the appetite for more, but the detail possible here is patently impossible in other areas, where the first substantial records date only from the end of the thirteenth century. This was a particular problem for Antonietta Moretti in her work on the Humiliati in the Ticino. Unlike most of the other works considered here, Moretti’s aim was to produce a catalogue of the houses in modern-day Switzerland for a volume in a long and prestigious series. She prefaced the book with a general introduction, but the real strength of her work lies in the exhaustive chasing of fleeting references: no historian will surely ever be able to trace a reference to the Humiliati in Italian Switzerland which has escaped her eagle eye.

Yet Moretti’s study also illustrates some of the problems with these new works. To some extent, powerful previous writing sets the agenda for all new work: thus Zanoni’s conclusions about the proletarian and wool-working base of the Humiliati have made an enquiry into their social

status almost a *sine qua non* of writing this century, and as we have seen the answers can be enlightening. However, in some cases the relevance of particular questions is stretched too far. In her introduction Moretti thus discusses Humiliati wool-working (one of the *topoi* of Humiliati history), although she can find no evidence for it in the area she has studied. Perhaps it would be more useful to question the extent to which we should expect groups in places quite distant from each other to agree on the best way to lead the religious life. What role does a growing centralised hierarchy play in that process? Moretti could perhaps have made more of the fact that she found no evidence for such ‘*topoi*’ of Humiliati history, be it their wool-working or the supposed prominence of women (her first woman superior comes from the early fourteenth century).

In spite of the strong historiographical sense in these articles and books, there is inevitably some lack of awareness of other work in progress: projects pursued simultaneously cannot always take account of other scholars’ conclusions. Although many of the studies acknowledge the help and interest of the Milan group, or have read their works as so far published, they do not always seem to be aware of everything that has become available. Thus Moretti confidently asserts that the social class of the Humiliati was noble while, as we have seen, Alberzoni gives a much more nuanced view, and Brolis and De Sandre Gasparini have demonstrated that in Bergamo and Verona the order was much more ‘middling’ in status, including notaries, brethren from the families of artisans and the odd merchant, and just a few from those of lawyers and judges.

There are some regrets: on occasion, especially when scanning the detail, one could wish the authors would raise their heads from the documents a little more often and look around them. How do the Humiliati compare with other such groups? The material for other local religious orders is increasingly available and an author with the breadth of De Sandre Gasparini has drawn attention to many of the similarities and links with the Mantuan canons of San Marco, but this again raises questions about other cities and other times. With some notable exceptions, these works do not cover the history of the Humiliati after the thirteenth century in other than summary form, relying on documents in Tiraboschi. It is also tantalising that, while many of these articles and books contain appendices with beautifully presented transcripts of one or two documents, so few of the carefully discussed documents edited for theses have been made available in print. This is all the more regrettable when other projects are making such works available. (An excellent example is the series of sources for the Venetian hinterland which includes a volume on the lepers of Verona, *Le carte dei lebbrosi di Verona tra xii e xiii secolo*, ed. A. Rossi Saccomani [Fonti per la storia della terraferma veneta iv, 1989], an edition of documents initially edited for a ‘tesi di laurea’ by a student of Giuseppina De Sandre Gasparini.)

There are also regrets in terms of the questions that remain

unanswerable or unasked. As many of these authors admit, most of what is new here is based on notarial sources which are unable to throw much light on the religious role of the order, its spiritual message or internal rhythms. But there are also questions which could be challenged head-on: the impact the Humiliati's early status as heretics, why they flourished in some regions and are not documented in others, why they were overtaken by the mendicants. None the less, such works give the beleaguered non-Italian historian, unable to spend the 'field-time' necessary to unearth so much detailed local material, the hope that there is more to come. They also provide a corrective to the old view of the Humiliati as pawns of papal policies. Alberzoni has shown that the desire for uniformity in 1199–1200 almost certainly sprang from their own internal initiative. There is not enough space to discuss all the new local studies on the Humiliati which have recently been published,⁸ but those discussed here reveal that the order was far more than a consortium of proletarian or noble wool-workers and that they remained prominent as a religious as well as a commercial presence in the cities and countryside of northern Italy even after the rise of the mendicants. They also show that variety was the name of the game. Above all, however, these studies have shown just how much new material there is to be found in the notarial archives of northern Italy. Perhaps we may now hope that there will be a standard Italian work on the Humiliati to replace Zanoni's eighty-five-year-old study in time for the eight-hundredth anniversary of the recognition of the order by Pope Innocent III in 1201. In history writing about northern Italy, it is certainly time for the Humiliati to graduate from walk-on roles to centre stage.

⁸ Two noteworthy omissions are M. Tagliabue, 'Gli Umiliati a Viboldone', *L'Abbazia di Viboldone*, Milan 1990, 9–33, and B. Samarati, 'I primi insediamenti Umiliati nella diocesi di Lodi: problemi', *Archivio storico lodigiano* cxii (1993), 85–117 (an article based on a 'tesi di laurea' supervised by Luisa Chiappa Mauri at the State University of Milan, 1992–3).