

The Thinker

Menocchio was a not-so-everyday miller with a few books and an impressive propensity for critical thinking. Although he had a limited library, he did not accept his books' teachings blindly. He instead thought deeply about the ideas presented and developed his own. Three of Menocchio's ideas illustrated this well: he cast the scriptures as texts meant to deceive people, he believed all humans, no matter what religion, were imbued with God's Holy Spirit, and he thought the Church was not holy but instead a business out for profit.

On the witness stand, Menocchio boldly agreed that "the Holy Scripture was devised to deceive men." "As for the things in the Gospels, I believe that some are true and some the evangelists made up out of their own heads," he said (Del Col, 44), pointing out the discrepancies in the Gospels' Passion narratives. This suggested to me that he read the Gospels carefully enough to pick out contradictions in their testimonies, and perhaps went to the priest about them but was unable to have them deciphered, so he just rejected the Gospels outright. This sort of comparative reading is very similar to the type of reading historians do today, picking out the differences between the books and trying to identify a common body of truth. Because of certain differences and similarities in the Gospels, many historians now think there is an unidentified common source that some (but not all) of the authors shared, and that other Gospels were based on each other. But Menocchio did not have the training to pick out these common threads; his decision to throw out the Gospels was fairly reasonable.

Menocchio was surprisingly egalitarian for his day. He believed that "the majesty of God has given the Holy Spirit to all, to Christians, to heretics, to Turks, and to Jews; and he considers them all dear, and they are all saved in the same manner" (Ginzberg, 9-10). In comparing Christians, Turks, and Jews, Menocchio admitted that "every person considers his faith to be

right, and we do not know which is the right one” (Ginzberg, 49). It was certainly not a mindset held by the Catholic Church, and I wondered how Menocchio had come up with that idea.

Menocchio himself said he had gotten some ideas from *Il cavalier Zuanne de Mandavilla*, which related the adventures of Mandeville. He noted, “since out of many different kinds of nations, some believe in one way and some in another,” the soul must die when the body does (Del Col, 33). I did not quite understand his argument—what pushed him to accept that idea about the soul and the body if different nations conflicted over it? It was also surprising to see him accept all of these different cultures as being as legitimate as the orthodox Catholicism being taught by his parish priest.

Il cavalier Zuanne de Mandavilla itself is a bit suspect: would a book purportedly written by a knight about his adventures actually know well the deep beliefs of other cultures? (It seems like Mandeville provided a reasonable survey of the Orthodox, Samaritans, Jacobians, etc., but he wasn’t exactly a trained theologian.) And why did Menocchio believe the author? Mandeville’s travels were akin to Marco Polo’s travels in the printing era. The book was very popular and introduced everyday millers and farmers to the exotic lands of India and Cathay (Ginzberg, 42). Evidently, people enjoyed the book, and at least Menocchio believed in its contents, since he quoted it extensively while on trial. Many of the accounts, especially those of the journey to the Orient, were more fantastical than real. Did people take this kind of writing at face value? Mandeville probably heard stories from others, at best, and then published them as a true-to-life account, so readers accepted the sense of authority and took the writing at face value. (There wasn’t exactly fact checking in publishing back in the 1500s.) This situation reminds me of Ambroise Paré’s *Collected Works*, which sought to catalogue all animals (including mythical ones), and presented them as real creatures. It’s possible that people were more likely to believe

printed accounts of unicorns because others had told them stories about unicorns before, but it also seems like there was a lot of (possibly unfounded) trust in the veracity of printed material in Menocchio's time.

Menocchio was exposed to many more peoples and cultures via books than he ever would have as the Montereale town miller. If he had had only a copy of the scriptures and nothing else, I doubt that Menocchio would have questioned so much of his local priest's teachings. Instead, Mandeville's fantastical descriptions gave Menocchio's imagination a boost.

Maybe Menocchio's ideas about the Holy Spirit led him to this conclusion about all humans sharing God's forgiveness. He had an interesting idea about the *spirit* coming "from God, and is that thing that when we have to act on some matter, inspires us to do it or not to do it" (Del Col, 33) versus the *soul* being something that died when the body died. He seemed to have created the spirit as something separate from the body and based wholly on faith. Maybe this idea of a separate spirit was what allowed him to apply it to different peoples, since in the end he saw us all as containers for the Holy Spirit. During his first trial, Menocchio said that "as soon as we are born, God sends us this angel" (Del Col, 36), which is presumably the Holy Spirit that he thinks all men are endowed with. This would explain why he believed all humans are cherished and saved by God. If a human received the Holy Spirit upon being born, what followed afterwards did not matter so much. After all, religion was an expression of a person's faith during that person's lifetime.

Menocchio did not attribute this idea to any particular book, but it did seem to fit closely with his other philosophies regarding the Catholic Church. He denounced confirmation as unnecessary and believed that anybody who had studied a bit of scripture and could interpret it could be a priest, no consecration or ordination needed (Del Col, 43). If people were already

endowed with the Holy Spirit from birth, anybody could be a priest; the customs and rituals of the Catholic Church were just manmade constructs. His animosity with his local priest probably helped fuel his opinions on the Church. He did not seem to have gotten this dissatisfaction with the Church from any of his readings, none of which directly criticized the Church (Ginzberg, 29). Rather, he probably drew this conclusion after solidifying his ideas on the Holy Spirit.

Menocchio does seem to have carefully read and cogitated on his books. He was able to pull out very relevant examples from his reading from time-to-time, and did so with an insistence, as he did when comparing the legend of the three rings to the viewpoints of Christians, Turks, and Jews (Ginzberg, 49-50). I thought it was an excellent analogy to the issue of which faith was correct, much better than some of the non sequiturs we encountered earlier in the trial—for example, his brief excursion into Simon Magus and lawsuits (Del Col, 41). He was clearly doing some critical thinking and wanted to share it: he began his statement with “I beg you, sir, listen to me” (Ginzberg, 49). I think he spent a lot of time with several books that did not give him answers directly to the questions he was pursuing, and slowly developed his “crazy” ideas on his own. His books “presented him with the facts,” and he drew his own conclusions, attributing them to his own “artful mind” (Ginzberg, 28).

However, as Ginzberg pointed out, Menocchio often distorted or mixed up the content from the books he had read (Ginzberg, 47). His inability to reliably cite sources is a problem: although he almost definitely read his small library several times through, he did not seem familiar enough with them to sort out the facts. Maybe he was reading several books simultaneously—trying to draw together facts related to a particular issue, he might read one chunk of one book and one of another, moving back and forth. He did not seem to be very meticulous about his sources and brashly attributed stories to sources that said nothing about

them, like that of Simon Magus (Del Col, 41). I think he had a practical outlook and cared more about the content of the books rather than attributing them perfectly.

Menocchio's opinions on the scriptures, the Holy Spirit, and the Church showed that although he was not reading overtly subversive texts, he read them carefully and came up with his own ideas that countered the orthodoxy's teachings. He was not very precise about his citations, but Menocchio was very interested in the ideas and concepts in his books and presented them eagerly to his judges and interrogators. As Menocchio himself says, "whatever ideas I had came out of my own head" (Del Col, 34). He was a miller who owned a few books and made a lot more out of them through the merit of his own reading, imagination, and intensive thinking.

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