

Domenico Cecere/Alessandro Tuccillo (eds)

Communication and Politics in  
the Hispanic Monarchy:  
Managing Times of Emergency



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Alessandro Tuccillo

## Divine intervention? The politics of interpreting disasters\*

### 1. Catastrophes and their causes

In November and December 1908, the ground shook across southern Calabria and eastern Sicily. This was a prelude to the earthquake of 28 December, whose magnitude of 7,1 Mw (Moment Magnitude Scale) made it one of the most powerful ever experienced in Italy. It destroyed major cities such as Reggio Calabria and Messina, where damage was estimated at level X and XI on the Mercalli-Cancani-Sieberg scale (MCS). Responding to the catastrophe was a major challenge for the Kingdom of Italy, which was still consolidating its political processes and governance following the 1861 unification. A shared compassion for the victims helped to establish an Italian national identity<sup>1</sup>. The earthquake also widened the Church/State rift that had emerged with the end of the temporal power of the papacy in 1870 and the secularisation of government and society by the Kingdom of Italy in the decades following its foundation. The Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica* railed against freemasons, Protestants, public bodies and newspapers that exploited the tragedy to ‘make the

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\* This work was supported by the DisComPoSE project, which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 759829).

1 See John Dickie, ‘Timing, Memory and Disaster: Patriotic Narratives in the Aftermath of the Messina-Reggio Calabria Earthquake, 28 December 1908’, *Modern Italy*, 11/2 (2006), 147–66; Id., *Una catastrofe patriottica. 1908: il terremoto di Messina* (Rome – Bari: Laterza, 2008). For a multidisciplinary analysis of this devastating earthquake, see Guido Bertolaso, Enzo Boschi, Emanuela Guidoboni, and Gianluca Valensise, eds, *Il terremoto e il maremoto del 28 dicembre 1908. Analisi sismologica, impatto, prospettive* (Rome – Bologna: INGV – SGA, 2008).

Italian people rebel against God'. In particular, this was an attack on the liberal anticlerical press and government bodies that had suppressed 'the sacred name of God in all of the many solemn acts organised by the secular authorities to address the earthquake'<sup>2</sup>.

The polemics were rekindled by the Roman Count Orazio Mazzella, Archbishop of Rossano Calabro and assistant at the Pontifical Throne, in a punchy booklet entitled *La Provvidenza di Dio, l'efficacia della preghiera, la carità cattolica ed il terremoto del 28 di dicembre. Cenni apologetici* (1909). He compared the looting that took place after the earthquake to 'the past and present moral exploitation of the enormous tragedy by atheists and secularists looting faith and charity'. He saw excising God from the interpretation of the earthquake, denouncing acts of veneration as ineffective and the non-religious organisations competing with the clergy on providing aid to the populace as 'a much graver catastrophe than the one that struck Calabria and Sicily by the hand of God'<sup>3</sup>. He claimed that the press had prolonged the tragedy and spread it to areas beyond those that had been struck: 'the earthquake killed bodies, the disbelieving propaganda kills souls: the earthquake caused a massacre in a few seconds and then stopped, the propaganda potentially persists in memory and continues to function'<sup>4</sup>. The 'lack of faith' had painted the catastrophe as 'the outcome of a *primordial necessity of nature, of blind fate*', of a universe seen as '*chaos*'. It was essential to reaffirm that the laws of physics were '*determined by God's ordering mind, wise and good, and by his powerful hand*'<sup>5</sup>. The Archbishop's affirmation of faith encapsulated centuries of debate on the relationship between the existence of a God that ruled the universe and the suffering that environmental calamities could inflict on the innocent. Mazzella refuted the 'unbelievers' who were prepared to use logic to conclude that a 'blind and tyrannical God' was the only

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2 'Sfruttamento settario della sventura', *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 60/1408 (1909), 385–98. The English translations of these citations and of the others drawn from Italian or Spanish sources are mine.

3 Orazio Mazzella, *La Provvidenza di Dio, l'efficacia della preghiera, la carità cattolica ed il terremoto del 28 di dicembre. Cenni apologetici* (Rome: Desclée, 1909), 6–7.

4 *Ibidem*, 10.

5 *Ibidem*, 14. The italics are Mazzella's.

alternative to the inexistence of God. He argued that God had not shown any clear punitive intent in launching the Messina earthquake. It was therefore impossible to state with certainty that it was divine retribution, but this could not be excluded. God might have punished Messina for the atheist propaganda of anticlerical circles, but the earthquake might also have been unleashed for some 'more general' physical or moral benefit, or simply for 'a purpose of which we are unaware'. Ultimately, the innocent victims of the catastrophe were a 'harsh necessity' within God's 'wise plan for creation', which was, by definition, correct<sup>6</sup>.

*La Civiltà Cattolica* and Archbishop Mazzella's *Cenni apologetici* raise questions that go beyond the 1908 earthquake. Recent work in the historiography of disasters caused by natural events has examined a hypothesis that marked a radical change in how such events were interpreted from the eighteenth century onwards. It had long been accepted that the Enlightenment had undermined the providentialist view of environmental calamities as an expression of God's punitive power, postulating instead a paradigm based on reason and nature according to which the causes of earthquakes, eruptions, floods and tsunamis are not metaphysical, but are to be investigated using the tools of the natural sciences. In fact, research in the cultural history of catastrophes has evidenced the persistence to this day of symbolic, religious or irrational elements in how disasters caused by natural events are interpreted. It is clear that the question has not been resolved, with different interpretative paradigms continuing to coexist, overlap and clash<sup>7</sup>.

The issue is not about how disruptive the Enlightenment was in this field of knowledge. It is about the discrepancy between facts and intellectual development. The coexistence of different paradigms, and the conflict between them, emerged from an examination of how Catholic circles in Italy reacted at the start of the twentieth century when the naturalistic

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6 *Ibidem*, 26–9.

7 See François Walter, *Catastrophes. Une histoire culturelle, XVI<sup>e</sup>–XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2008); Jens Ivo Engels, and Gerrit Jasper Schenk, eds, *Historical Disaster Research. Concepts, Methods and Case Studies, Historical Social Research*, 121 (2007); Andrea Janku, Gerrit Jasper Schenk, and Franz Mauelshagen, eds, *Historical Disasters in Context: Science, Religion, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2012).

interpretation of earthquakes was already firmly established. *La Civiltà Cattolica* and Mazzella framed their arguments as a clash with positivist secularism and the liberal Italian State. The situation appeared in many ways very different in ancien régime times, but even then there were conflicting interpretations. The dominance of providentialism did not stifle discussion of the causes of earthquakes, as there were plenty of critical voices attributing disasters to natural phenomena.

Debate on whether divine intervention causes earthquakes therefore serves as a valuable vantage point from which to examine the long-term dynamics of political, religious and social history. The 1908 earthquake deepened existing wounds. Similarly, the events examined in the case studies presented here reflected inflamed tensions. The earthquakes that struck the Kingdom of Naples towards the end of the seventeenth century, when southern Italy and Sicily were part of the Hispanic Monarchy, were a chapter in the ongoing struggle between the Church, new scientific paradigms and the Spanish authorities. The aftermath of any disaster provided an opportunity for the Church to intervene in order to reinforce and amplify its presence in society, on which its prerogatives were based. In the pursuit of these primarily political activities, the Church operated at various levels, from Apostolic Nuncios to Inquisition tribunals, from dioceses to parishes. The starting point for our investigation of these activities will be the correspondence of the Apostolic Nuncios and bishops with the Secretary of State of the Holy See.

## 2. Two late-seventeenth-century earthquakes

On 8 September 1694, a powerful earthquake struck inland areas of the Kingdom of Naples. A number of villages along the Apennine mountain range, in the old provinces of Principato Ultra and Basilicata, were completely destroyed and many others suffered serious damage. The city of Potenza was hit more severely than others, but the earthquake was also felt in Avellino, Salerno and Naples. The first accounts of the disaster are from the capital. On 10 September, the Apostolic Nuncio Lorenzo Casoni sent a batch of *avvisi* to Rome addressed to Cardinal Fabrizio Spada, Secretary of State to Pope Innocent XII. They emphasised the force of the tremors of two days earlier, at shortly before '18 ore' Italic time (around



11:40 GMT), which continued for ‘the length of a *Miserere*’ (Psalm 51). The tone was almost reassuring, as no fatalities had been confirmed, nor any major damage to churches or houses. Elsewhere, the situation appeared to be much more serious. The *avvisi* noted that ‘travellers’ had reported that the earthquake had spread out from Naples, causing enormous damage in more remote locations, explicitly mentioning ‘Puglia’, ‘Capitanata’, ‘Principato’ and ‘Calabria’<sup>8</sup>.

Casoni sent additional details later, but he was not the Secretary of State’s only source of information. Cardinal Giacomo Cantelmo, Archbishop of Naples, had written to him on the same day, 10 September, also noting that the fear sparked by the earthquake was mitigated by the fact that ‘for the moment the damage is estimated as not particularly noteworthy’<sup>9</sup>. Over the following days, however, the situation turned grimmer. As usual, when emergencies struck the Kingdom of Naples information from across the hinterland flowed into the capital and was the basis on which accounts were elaborated in secular and clerical official channels, and in broader channels<sup>10</sup>. The earthquake had initially seemed an event

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8 Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (AAV), *Segreteria di Stato (SS)*, *Napoli*, 118, batch of *avvisi*, Casoni to Spada, Naples, 10 September 1694, cc. 163r–164v. Transcriptions of these and other letters from the correspondence of Secretary of State Spada are available on the website ‘Terremoto Irpinia-Basilicata 1694’, in Emanuela Guidoboni, Graziano Ferrari, Dante Mariotti, Alberto Comastri, Gabriele Tarabusi, Giulia Sgattoni, and Gianluca Valensise, eds, *Catalogo dei Forti Terremoti in Italia (461 a.C.–1997) e nell’area Mediterranea (760 a.C.–1500) – CFTI5Med* (Rome: The National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV), 2018), <https://storing.ingv.it/cfti/cfti5/quake.php?01166IT>. For technical details, sources and the literature on the ‘Terremoto Irpinia-Basilicata 1694’, and on all other Italian earthquakes, the *Catalogo dei Forti terremoti in Italia* is an invaluable albeit not exhaustive reference. The originals of all of the documents analysed here were consulted for this paper, but not all of them have been transcribed and referenced in the *Catalogo*.

9 AAV, *SS*, *Cardinali*, 59, Cantelmo to Spada, Naples 10 September 1694, ff. 232r–v.

10 The dynamics of this process with respect to the 1688 Sannio earthquake are addressed in Alessandro Tuccillo, ‘Troubling News Travels Fast: The Sannio Earthquake ripples through the Spanish Monarchy’, forthcoming in Brendan Dooley and Sandy Wilkinson, eds, *Exciting News! Event, Narration and Impact from Past to Present*. The politics of information have for some years been central issues in the historiography of the early modern period. See, for example,

of limited destructive force centred on the city of Naples, but, as the days passed, in September it became clear that it was mainly other areas that had been affected. Indeed, recent studies have estimated its intensity in Naples at level VII on the MCS scale, but its actual destructive force was greater in other areas, reaching level VIII in Potenza and level X in villages closer to the epicentre such as Cairano, Calitri or Pescopagano<sup>11</sup>.

The catastrophe generated widespread awe, which created a potential readership eager to buy publications that went into greater or lesser detail: *vere relazioni*, poems and accounts, sometimes just a few pages long, about earthquakes, floods, eruptions and so on. These works found a natural home in seventeenth-century Naples. Writers, poets and naturalists could wield their pens whenever the frequent environmental disasters struck. The most dramatic was the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1631. There were also epidemics such as the plague of 1656, socio-political events seen as catastrophic such as the Masaniello revolution, and the more general upheavals of 1647–1648<sup>12</sup>. Periodicals were then

Brendan Dooley, and Sabrina A. Baron, eds, *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe* (London – New York: Routledge, 2001); Brendan Dooley, ed., *The Dissemination of News and the Emergence of Contemporaneity in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News. How the World Came to Know about Itself* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2014); Massimo Rospocher, ‘Per una storia della comunicazione nella prima età moderna. Un bilancio storiografico’, *Annali dell’Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, 44 (2018), 37–62.

- 11 Estimates of the levels reached on the MCS scale in the different areas affected are available on the ‘Terremoto Irpinia-Basilicata 1694’ page in the *Catalogo dei forti terremoti in Italia*.
- 12 See Giancarlo Alfano, Marcello Barbato, and Andrea Mazzucchi, eds, *Tre catastrofi. Eruzioni, rivolta e peste nella poesia del Seicento napoletano* (Naples: Cronopio, 2000); Giancarlo Alfano, ‘La città delle catastrofi’, in Sergio Luzzatto, and Gabriele Pedullà, eds, *Atlante della letteratura italiana*, vol. II, Erminia Irace, ed., *Dalla Controriforma alla Restaurazione* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), 527–33; Id., *The Portrait of Catastrophe: The Image of the City in Seventeenth-century Neapolitan Culture*, in Domenico Cecere, Chiara De Caprio, Lorenza Gianfrancesco, and Pasquale Palmieri, eds, *Disaster Narratives in Early Modern Naples. Politics, Communication and Culture* (Rome: Viella, 2018), 147–56. For a linguistic analysis of texts on disasters in the Kingdom of Naples over a longer period of time, see Chiara De Caprio, ‘Narrating Disasters: Writers and Texts Between Historical Experience and Narrative

beginning to emerge across Europe, and the news they provided was based on these publications, as well as on printed or manuscript *avvisi*. Although the narrative style and rhetorical devices they used did not always match their intended readership, it is worth noting that periodicals were emerging just as processes of overlap, contamination and specialisation were being elaborated, processes that led to the definition of the literary, scientific and political periodical<sup>13</sup>.

The providentialist account was the undisputed basis on which disasters were handled by religious and political authorities, and by society as a whole. Chronicles and even more so literary works that described the awe produced by disasters reflected the widespread conviction of governing bodies and those they governed that preventing such natural dangers required penitence, and religious and moral regeneration. In the case of

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Discourse', and Francesco Montuori, 'Voices of the "totale eccidio": On the Lexicon of Earthquakes in the Kingdom (1456–1784)', *ibidem*, 19–40, 41–72.

13 See, in this volume, Vincenzo Leonardi, 'The rhetoric of disasters between the pre-periodical and the periodical press: the Guadalmedina flood (1661) and the case of the *Gazeta Nueva*'. For a general overview of the issue, see Mario Infelise, *Prima dei giornali. Alle origini della pubblica informazione, secoli XVI e XVII* (Rome – Bari: Laterza, 2022, originally publ. 2002); Roger Chartier, and Carmen Espejo-Cala, eds, *La aparición del periodismo en Europa. Comunicación y propaganda en el Barroco* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2012); Mario Infelise, *Gazzetta. Storia di una parola* (Venice: Marsilio, 2017). On the relationship between oral communication, manuscripts and printed matter in the large-scale dissemination of news in Italy and Iberia, see Filippo De Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice. Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Alberto Natale, *Gli specchi della paura. Il sensazionale e il prodigioso nella letteratura di consumo, secoli XVII-XVIII* (Rome: Carocci, 2008); Carmen Espejo-Cala, 'Gacetas y relaciones de sucesos en la segunda mitad del XVII: una comparativa europea', in Pedro Manuel Cátedra García, and María Eugenia Díaz Tena, eds, *Géneros editoriales y relaciones de sucesos en la Edad Moderna* (Salamanca: Semyr, 2013), 71–88; Pasquale Palmieri, 'Interactions between Orality, Manuscript and Print Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Recent Historiographical Trends', *Storia della Storiografia*, 73/1 (2018), 135–48; Fernando Bouza, 'Entre archivos, despachos y noticias: (d)escribir la información en la edad moderna', *Cuadernos de Historia Moderna*, 44/1 (2019), 229–40; with reference to disasters in particular, Gennaro Schiano, *Relatar la catástrofe en el Siglo de Oro. Entre noticia y narración* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021).

earthquakes that had already struck, the threat was that further tremors might occur or that the suffering of the people might increase. Managing catastrophes could therefore not ignore the need for processions, acts of devotion to the Madonna and the saints, confession, individual and collective penitence, as well as government measures designed to limit or suppress any practices or attitudes deemed to be heretical or likely to instigate divine indignation. Responses to disasters might therefore look similar across the different socio-political contexts that made up the Hispanic Monarchy<sup>14</sup>. This shared frame of reference did not, however, absolve the political and religious authorities of other responsibilities, as they clearly had to provide immediate material assistance to victims and undertake reconstruction work as swiftly as possible. Although catastrophes were framed as providential events, they also had to be addressed using the worldly tools at the disposal of the authorities, and taking appropriate public communication measures. Political and religious authorities paid particular attention to the publications on disasters over which they had some control<sup>15</sup>. Measures providing assistance and reconstruction works were therefore described as appropriate and appreciated by a populace that channelled its suffering into support for the activities of the State and the Church, with society portrayed as united in the face of adversity.

Controlling communication was critical in times of emergency. It was essential domestically, to consolidate acceptance and reduce the danger of

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14 See Armando Alberola Romá, and Jorge Olcina Cantos, eds, *Desastre natural, vida cotidiana y religiosidad popular en la España moderna y contemporánea* (Alicante: Universidad de Alicante 2009); María Eugenia Petit-Breuilh Sepúlveda, 'Religiosidad y rituales hispanos en América ante los desastres (siglos XVI–XVII): las procesiones', *Revista de Historia Moderna. Anales de la Universidad de Alicante*, 35 (2017), 83–115.

15 See Françoise Lavocat, 'Narratives of Catastrophe in the Early Modern Period: Awareness of Historicity and Emergence of Interpretative Viewpoints', *Poetics Today*, 33 (2012), 253–99. For the case of Naples, see Domenico Cecere, 'Moralising Pamphlets: Calamities, Information and Propaganda in Seventeenth-Century Naples', in Cecere, De Caprio, Gianfrancesco, and Palmieri, eds, *Disaster Narratives in Early Modern Naples*, 129–45. See also Lonna Atkeson, and Cherie D. Maestas, *Catastrophic Politics. How Extraordinary Events Redefine Perceptions of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

a catastrophe provoking social disorder, and internationally, to demonstrate to foreign friends and foes the authorities' ability to handle crises. Handling emergencies caused by natural events was therefore a complex matter that was based on information from the areas affected, on expert opinion derived from earlier experience of similar situations, on the validation of existing risk reduction measures, and on the management of official communications. This complexity differs from the traditional representation of ancien régime societies, long considered ill-equipped to handle emergencies of this kind, and essentially paralysed by the fatalism of the interpretation of disasters as a manifestation of divine will. Recent research has revealed that the situation was in fact variable and nonuniform<sup>16</sup>. The Hispanic Monarchy stretched across a broad range of different climatic and environmental contexts<sup>17</sup>, and the response to disaster emergencies was not limited to tax exemption, charitable works and religious rites<sup>18</sup>.

16 Domenico Cecere, 'Dall'informazione alla gestione dell'emergenza. Una proposta per lo studio dei disastri ambientali in età moderna', *Storica*, 77 (2020), 9–40.

17 See Armando Alberola Romá, ed., *Clima, naturaleza y desastre. España e Hispanoamérica durante la Edad Moderna* (Valencia: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Valencia, 2013); Armando Alberola Romá, and Luis A. Arrijoa Díaz Viruell, eds, *Clima, desastres y convulsiones sociales en España e Hispanoamérica, siglos XVII–XX* (Alicante – Zamora: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alicante – El Colegio de Michoacán, 2016); Armando Alberola Romá, ed., *Riesgo, desastre y miedo en la península Ibérica y México durante la Edad Moderna* (Alicante – Zamora: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alicante – El Colegio de Michoacán, 2017); Armando Alberola Romá, and Virginia García-Acosta, eds, *La Pequeña Edad del Hielo a ambos lados del Atlántico. Episodios climáticos extremos, terremotos, erupciones volcánicas y crisis* (Alicante: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alicante, 2021).

18 See the case studies in Domenico Cecere, ed., 'Disastri naturali e informazione negli imperi di età moderna', *Studi storici*, 60/4 (2019), 773–874; Id., ed., 'Calamità ambientali e risposte politiche nella Monarchia ispanica (secc. XVII–XVIII)', *Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche*, 51 (2021), 63–206; Armando Alberola Romá, and Domenico Cecere, eds, *Rischio, catastrofe e gestione dell'emergenza nel Mediterraneo occidentale e in Ispanoamerica in età moderna. Omaggio a Jean-Philippe Luis* (Naples – Alicante: FedOA Federico II University Press – Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alicante, 2022); Yasmina Rocío Ben Yessef Garfia, ed., 'Desastres en la América hispánica: circulación de saberes y noticias (siglos XVI–XVIII)', *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* [Online], *Débats*, last accessed 31 January 2023, <https://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/86758>. See also Domenico Cecere, 'Estrategias de comunicación y de intervención frente

The authorities of the Kingdom of Naples went into action at various levels following the earthquake of 8 September 1694, from the *università* representing local communities to the *Regia Camera della Sommaria* (the central body in charge of public finances and an administrative court), the Viceroy and the *Consiglio Collaterale* (council with political and juridical powers that supported the work of the viceroy). The gathering of information followed standard practice, with the central authorities requesting and reviewing detailed accounts from the communities affected and using them to formulate rescue and reconstruction measures. This was a well-honed practice given the frequency of seismic activity in the Kingdom of Naples<sup>19</sup>.

The last earthquake that had struck Naples served as a special reference point for the 1694 disaster. Archbishop Cantelmo, in the letter to Secretary of State Spada cited above, described the earthquake as ‘felt very clearly’ but ‘not as great as that of 1688’<sup>20</sup>. He reminded Spada of the Sannio earthquake of 5 June 1688, whose force has been estimated as at level VIII on the MCS scale, greater than the 1694 earthquake<sup>21</sup>. The *avvisi* transcribed by Apostolic Nuncio Casoni do not mention earlier events, but on 21 September he sent a printed document to Rome which contained a clear reference to 1688: the *Vera e distinta relatione dello spaventoso e funesto terremoto accaduto in Napoli e parte del suo Regno il giorno 8 settembre 1694*. This eight-page account had been put together in a matter of days by Domenico Antonio Parrino and Camillo Cavallo. It provided something of an official version of the disaster, painstakingly outlining many of the responses of the secular and clerical authorities to the emergency. This was characteristic of publications of this nature intended to be circulated widely. Moreover, Parrino was seen as trustworthy

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a desastres en la Monarquía Hispánica bajo Carlos II’, *Revista de Historia Moderna*, 39 (2021), 1–36.

19 See Gaia Bruno, ‘Fronteggiare l’emergenza: le reazioni delle istituzioni del regno di Napoli di fronte ai sismi del XVII secolo’, *Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche*, 51 (2021), 119–50.

20 AAV, SS, *Cardinali*, 59, Cantelmo to Spada, Naples 10 September 1694.

21 On the 1688 Sannio earthquake, see the relevant page of *Catalogo dei Forti Terremoti in Italia*. <http://storing.ingv.it/cfti/cfti5/quake.php?01108IT#>

by the viceregal authorities as he was the official printer of *avvisi* and *relazioni*<sup>22</sup>.

The *Vera e distinta relatione* described the earthquake of 8 September 1694 almost as an unexpected event. Indeed, the common view was that two other calamities that had struck just a few years earlier had ‘liberated the nation of the misfortune of such terrible punishment’. There were references to the ‘the most tragic earthquake that struck this City of Naples on 5 June 1688’ and the ‘recent extraordinary and astounding eruption of our neighbour Mount Vesuvius, which generated universal awe’, namely the eruption of April 1694<sup>23</sup>. It is worth noting that the Mount Vesuvius eruption, like the earlier one of December 1689, was not noted as particularly destructive. Casoni’s correspondence contains *avvisi* that stress that people surveyed ‘such a spectacle fearlessly’ once the initial terror had passed. This feeling of safety was due to the measures introduced by Francisco de Benavides Dávila y Corella, Count of Santisteban, who was Viceroy of Naples from 1688 to 1696. He had ordered excavation work to divert the lava flow to the sea to avoid it reaching the surrounding farmland<sup>24</sup>. Research work in disaster studies has demonstrated that whether a natural event takes on the air of a disaster depends on the material and social impact it has on the community affected<sup>25</sup>. In this case, the danger turned into a ‘spectacle’, and the Viceroy’s measures meant that the trauma was overcome. In contrast, the 1688 earthquake had huge social impact that served as a baseline for the traumatic situation of September 1694. It

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22 See Anna Maria Rao, ‘Mercato e privilegi: la stampa periodica’, in Ead., ed., *Editoria e cultura a Napoli nel XVIII secolo* (Naples: Liguori 1998), 173–99. See also Giovanni Lombardi, ‘L’attività carto-libreria a Napoli tra fine ’600 e primo ’700’, *ibidem*, 75–96 and Annastella Carrino, ‘Parrino Domenico Antonio’, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2014), vol. 81, *ad vocem*.

23 *Vera e distinta relatione dello spaventoso e funesto terremoto accaduto in Napoli e parte del suo Regno il giorno 8 settembre 1694* (Naples: Domenico Antonio Parrino, Camillo Cavallo, 1694), (*Vera e distinta relatione 1694* henceforth).

24 AAV, SS, *Napoli*, 117, batch of *avvisi*, Casoni to Spada, Naples, 20 April 1694, ff. 301v–2r.

25 See Ronald W. Perry, and Enrico L. Quarantelli, eds, *What Is a Disaster? New Answers to Old Questions* (Bloomington: International Research Committee on Disasters, 2005); Walter, *Catastrophes*.

was ‘divine goodness’ that turned ‘a similar misfortune’ into an event that was ‘much less destructive’. Only divine intervention, deemed to be the cause of the earthquake, could attenuate its force, thus confuting ‘human beliefs’ and the blindness of ‘its philosophies’ that held any repetition of the event as improbable<sup>26</sup>. Parrino’s *relazione* on the 1688 earthquake went into greater depth on theological and moral issue than that of 1694. The vibrant description of the ‘catastrophe’ that threatened the city with ‘final extermination’ in his *Vera e distinta relatione dell’horribile, e spaventoso terremoto accaduto in Napoli, & in più parti del Regno il giorno 5 giugno 1688* saw the ‘secrets of divine judgement’ as unfathomable by ‘human intellect’, and blamed mankind for the ‘tragedy representing divine justice served on this Kingdom’<sup>27</sup>.

Seeing the tragedy as a manifestation of divine ire was, as one might expect, the interpretative framework offered in the two official *relazioni*. Nevertheless, these documents reveal a striking line of argumentation. Even in ancien régime societies, the naturalistic interpretation of the earthquake and of any environmental calamity was a threat to those who wielded power, and in particular to Church authorities. The socio-political situation in late seventeenth-century Naples provides food for thought in the investigation of this conflict, whose relevance is not limited to eighteenth-century societies. Divine ire in the form of an earthquake could be used as a powerful tool to exert political and diplomatic pressure in the defence of the prerogatives of the Church against the power of the secular authorities of Madrid and Naples. It could also be used to denounce and deter the spread of new scientific ideas that undermined religious orthodoxy and authority.

### 3. A dispute in verse

Before going into the details of the Church’s tactics, it is worth considering what was at stake in the dispute over the cause of the earthquake. The words of an early seventeenth-century poet from Friuli are particularly

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<sup>26</sup> *Vera e distinta relatione 1694*.

<sup>27</sup> *Vera e distinta relatione dell’horribile e spaventoso terremoto accaduto in Napoli & in più parti del Regno il giorno 5 giugno 1688* (Naples: Domenico Antonio Parrino, 1688).



useful here: *Ciro di Pers*. His name refers to the village of Pers, near Udine, where he was born in 1599. He died in 1663, and his poetry has principally been handed down in posthumous collections, starting with the *Poesie* published in Florence and Vicenza in 1666. He was long considered a minor poet until his work attracted the increasing interest of scholars of Italian Baroque poetry in the twentieth century<sup>28</sup>. A decisive moment in the rediscovery of his work was the publication in 1978 of the only modern edition of his verses available in print, edited by Michele Rak<sup>29</sup>. Two of his sonnets are about the earthquake: *Con moto spaventoso ecco tremanti* and *Deh, qual possente man con forze ignote*, poems 97 and 98 in Rak's publication. The disaster adds significant dramatic tension to the negativity and anguish that characterises his work, a tension that merges into religious tension. In sonnet 97, the *moto spaventoso* [fearsome motion] is portrayed as a compassionate manifestation of divine will. As thunder and lightning had failed to rouse the *umana mente* [human mind], the ground was shaken by *pietoso Dio* [merciful God] to rebuke mankind for its *gravi colpe* [grave faults]<sup>30</sup>. Sonnet 98 reaffirms the traditional providentialist interpretation of the earthquake, rejecting any naturalistic explanation. For *Ciro di Pers*, the *man possente* [powerful hand] that made the ground shake was not driven by *forze ignote* [unknown forces] but by the will of God. The earth shook under the burden of the weight of sinners, swallowing up their bodies to fill its empty bowels<sup>31</sup>. In both sonnets, the earthquake served to chastise sinners more effectively than divine manifestations hurled down from the heavens: *tuono* [thunder],

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28 Benedetto Croce included a selection of poems by *Ciro di Pers* in the anthology *Lirici marinisti* (Bari: Laterza, 1910), 363–406.

29 *Ciro di Pers, Poesie*, Michele Rak, ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 1978). Apart from the introduction in the Rak edition of the *Poesie*, a brief biography of *Ciro di Pers* and notes on his poetry can be found in Lorenzo Carpanè, 'Pers, *Ciro di*', in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2015), vol. 82, *ad vocem*, which provides updated information on available sources and on the literature.

30 'Ah, ch'! pietoso Dio, già che non puote / svegliarsi al suon del ciel l'umana mente, / perché più non dormiamo ecco ne scuote', *Ciro di Pers, Poesie*, sonnet 97 'Terremoto', 99.

31 'Certo la terra si risente e scuote / perché del peccator l'aggrava il piede / e i nostri corpi impaziente chiede', *ibidem*, sonnet 98 'Terremoto', 100.

*fulmine* [lightning], *baleno* [thunderbolts]<sup>32</sup>. In the closing tercet of sonnet 98, *Ciro di Pers* emphasises that God made the ground shake so that his voice would be heard by *uomo ch'esser vuol tutto terreno* [mankind that wants to be solely of the earth], thus addressing modern philosophy's investigation of nature – and of human nature itself – and excluding divine will and divine intervention. When the earthquake struck a mankind that was *tutto terreno* [solely of the earth] and failed to heed the *cielo* [heavens], people could at least be encouraged by the *parlar della terra* [speaking of the earth]<sup>33</sup>. The closing tercet thus harks back to the opening quatrain, which challenges the theories that identify the cause of earthquakes as mere processes of nature, in particular as steam trapped underground (*chiuso vapor*) as proposed by Aristotle<sup>34</sup>. Poetry thus echoed old debates that were still raging in the first decades of the seventeenth century.

The notion that earthquakes were caused by divine forces was widespread well beyond the Judeo-Christian world. With respect to the metaphysical beliefs of other peoples of the ancient Near East, the peculiarity of the Old Testament was the interpretation of earthquakes as a manifestation of Yahweh, one of the ways in which the chosen people of Israel were shown God's ire or simply his presence. It was also normal for earthquakes to be associated with divine ire or punishment in Graeco-Roman societies. Ancient Rome saw earthquakes as disruption of the equilibrium between the natural world of man and the supernatural world of the gods. The violent shaking of the ground was an omen that sinning needed to be expiated in rites and festivities in honour of Tellus and other divinities. Poseidon, who was already recognised as a god in Mycenaean times, was noted in Homer as the lord of the sea and the shaker of the earth. Even when he mutated into Neptune in Roman times, he was linked to environmental calamities at sea and on dry land for centuries. Images of the god

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32 'È il linguaggio del ciel che ne riprende / il turbo il tuono il fulmine il baleno, or parla anco la terra in note orrende: *ibidem*.

33 'Perché l'uom, ch'esse vuol tutto terreno / né del cielo il parlar straniero intende, / il parlar della terra intenda al meno', *ibidem*.

34 'Non è chiuso vapor, come altri crede', *ibidem*.

breaking up the ground with his trident to trigger an earthquake was also a common topos in Christian times<sup>35</sup>.

Ciro di Pers entered the fray of the long-standing debate using this topos to reject the notion that the earthquake was caused by the *sognato tridente* [imaginary trident] striking the ground<sup>36</sup>. The metaphysical explanation of earthquakes and other disasters, like tsunamis when it came to Poseidon, had also come in for criticism in ancient times. Aristotle's *Meteorologica* set the scene for the naturalist interpretation. It held that the sun heating the earth produced *soffio vitale* [breath of life], the pneuma that generates winds. Its accumulation underground eventually reached a level of saturation that made the ground shake. This naturalist explanation of the cause of earthquakes created an unavoidable problem for Christianity, which wavered between rejection and acceptance. This clash with classical culture made the apologists of primitive Christianity see any naturalist theory that went against the providentialist paradigm of the Bible as heretical. It was Thomas Aquinas who elaborated a compromise, framing Aristotle's theory of winds within orthodox Christianity by affirming that the 'breath of life' had a divine origin, with material forces deriving from this first cause, i.e. God. This interpretation of earthquakes and other disasters caused by natural events dominated the early modern period. The providentialist paradigm thus welcomed the Aristotelian phenomenology of earthquakes, but without ceasing to see natural disasters as the *flagellum dei* inflicted on mankind to punish their sinning and to warn of the consequences of earthly perdition. However, environmental calamities could also be the work of the Devil, or a tool in the hands of God to produce beneficial effects beyond the immediate catastrophic impacts. The destruction of a city and the suffering of its residents could produce benefits such as, for example, the creation of mountains after an earthquake or the increased fertility of farmland following a volcanic eruption.

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35 See Emanuela Guidoboni, and Jean-Paul Poirier, *Quand la terre tremblait* (Paris: Jacob, 2004) and the more recent enlarged version in Italian *Storia culturale del terremoto dal mondo antico a oggi* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino, 2019), 41–57.

36 'Né sognato tridente il suol percuote', *Ciro di Pers, Poesie*, sonnet 98, 'Terremoto', 100.

More generally, catastrophes retained the primordial aura of an unfathomable phenomenon that transcended the limits of human reason, and could therefore only be understood by God<sup>37</sup>. The divine origin of earthquakes was a concept that remained set in stone. Indeed, the question was still the subject of fiery debate following the 1908 Messina earthquake.

In his two sonnets on the earthquake, *Ciro di Pers* adopted a widely held conservative position. Although modern scientific philosophy was certainly not alien to Christianity in the seventeenth century, it was eating away at the traditional view of the Creator's cosmos at various levels. The compromise proposed by Thomas Aquinas might even seem rather feeble in the face of these implicit and explicit attacks. The sonnets expressed a radical view consonant with the line promoted by the Church that not only attributed the unleashing of the punishment to God but also placed little trust in the Aristotelian phenomenology of earthquakes, denying that the cause could be trapped steam. The Kingdom of Naples produced a vast amount of poetry supporting the providentialist interpretation of earthquakes and other disasters, whether natural or political<sup>38</sup>. The decision to focus on the works of *Ciro di Pers*, who had no significant links with southern Italy, may therefore seem incongruous. Yet it was his verses that were brought into play in the *Vera e distinta relatione* on the 1694 earthquake. There was no explicit reference to *Ciro di Pers*, but its closing lines included a veiled allusion to wise and elegant poetry, followed by a transcription of sonnet 98, *Deh, qual possente man con forze*<sup>39</sup>.

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37 See Guidoboni, and Poirier, *Storia culturale del terremoto*, and Christian Rohr, 'Writing a Catastrophe: Describing and Constructing Disaster Perception in Narrative Sources from the Late Middle Ages', *Historical Social Research*, 32, 3 (2007), 88–102; Gerrit Jasper Schenk, *Dis-astri. Modelli interpretativi delle calamità naturali dal Medioevo al Rinascimento*, in Michael Matheus, Gabriella Piccinni, Giuliano Pinto, and Gian Maria Varanini, eds, *Le calamità ambientali nel tardo Medioevo europeo. Realtà, percezioni, reazioni* (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2010), 23–75.

38 See Antonio Perrone, *Poesie d'amore e d'altri disastri. Antologia di liriche del Meridione barocco* (Rome: Carocci, 2021); Carolina Borrelli, and Antonio Perrone, eds, *Scelta di poesie nell'incendio del Vesuvio di Urbano Giorgi* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2021); Antonio Perrone, *Il palinsesto della catastrofe. La metafora tra lirica e scienza nel Barocco meridionale* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2023).

39 *Vera e distinta relatione 1694*.

Naples was familiar with the poetry of *Ciro di Pers*. Seventeenth-century editions of his work include one published in Naples in 1669 by Giovanni Francesco Paci, which contains sonnets 97 and 98<sup>40</sup>. It therefore comes as no surprise that his defence of the providentialist paradigm was used as a seal of approval for Parrino's interpretation. His *relazione* notes that when tremors occurred 'a fresh wind could be felt'. This was to counter the 'opinion of many philosophers' who asserted that earthquakes were produced by warm winds 'concentrated in the bowels of the Earth', adding that a theory of this kind 'like a hundred other philosophical causes must be seen as a fantasy, a fairy tale'. The only cause of 'these and other punishments' was 'the omnipotence of He who governs everything', who acted 'either to castigate, or to call on blasphemers to mend their ways'<sup>41</sup>.

Sonnet 98 had thus become a poetic channel for the defence of the traditional view against positions that questioned the divine nature of the cause of earthquakes, positions that were seen as a threat to political and religious order.

#### 4. Earthquakes in the defence of the Church's prerogatives

The claim that postulating natural causes for earthquakes might jeopardise social order may today seem somewhat generic, but this was not the case in Naples in 1694. Some three years earlier, the Inquisition had reopened its proceedings against a group of people accused of atomism, a philosophical doctrine seen as a prelude to atheism.

On 21 March 1688, Giuseppe Nicola Giberti, Bishop of Teano and the Inquisition's minister delegate for the Kingdom of Naples, received a document accusing a group of jurists, scientists and men of letters of heresy for being supporters of the 'atomistic philosophy'. The accusation was made by one who frequented these circles. The accusations referred to concepts derived from the works of classical thinkers such as Lucretius

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40 *Poesie del cavaliere fra Ciro di Pers dedicate all' Illustriss. & Eccellentiss. Signora D. Leonora Loffredo principessa di Valle* (Naples: Giovanni Francesco Paci – Cosimo Fioravanti, 1669). On the publications and manuscripts of the poetry of *Ciro di Pers*, see Lorenzo Carpanè, *La tradizione manoscritta e a stampa delle poesie di Ciro di Pers* (Milan: Guerini 1997).

41 *Vera e distinta relatione 1694*.

and modern philosophers such as Bacon, Descartes, Galileo and Gassendi. The winds of change had been gusting through Naples for a number of decades, gradually replacing the rigidity of Thomism with *libertas philosophandi* [freedom of thought]. Its main promoters were the *ceto civile*, members of the legal profession to whom the viceregal authorities had assigned governance responsibilities in order to dilute the power of the feudal nobility. The atomists, known as *novatores*, congregated to propound their ideas in academies such as the *Accademia degli Investiganti*, founded in 1663 on the model of the English Royal Society. Studying the corpuscles on which life is based, thus eroding the concept of the divine as the first cause, also undermined the temporal power of the Church. The accusations received by Giberti led to an inquisition trial that lasted some ten years, concluding with relatively moderate consequences for those accused. This trial of atheists is well known in historiography<sup>42</sup>, which has

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42 See the reference works by Luciano Osbat, *L'Inquisizione a Napoli. Il processo agli ateisti. 1688–1697* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1974); and Giuseppe Galasso, *Napoli spagnola dopo Masaniello. Politica, cultura, società* (Florence: Sansoni, 1982), 443–73. See also the recent paper by Vittoria Fiorelli, ‘“Experiences Are Not Successful Accompaniments to Knowledge of the Truth”. The Trial of the Atheists in Late Seventeenth-Century Naples’, in Andreea Badea, Bruno Boute, Marco Cavarzere, and Steven Broecke, eds, *Making Truth in Early Modern Catholicism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021) 263–78. On religious life in Naples, see the classic volume by Romeo De Maio, *Società e vita religiosa a Napoli nell’età moderna (1656–1799)* (Naples: Esi, 1971). On the intellectual circles of Naples and the repercussions of the trial, see Vittor Ivo Comparato, *Giuseppe Valletta. Un intellettuale napoletano della fine del Seicento* (Naples: Istituto italiano per gli Studi storici, 1970); Biagio De Giovanni, ‘La vita intellettuale a Napoli tra la metà del ‘600 e la restaurazione del Regno’, in *Storia di Napoli* (Naples: Società editrice ‘Storia di Napoli’, 1970), VI, 403–534; Vincenzo Ferrone, *Scienza natura religione. Mondo newtoniano e cultura italiana nel primo Settecento* (Naples: Jovene, 1982); Anna Maria Rao, ‘Fra amministrazione e politica. Gli ambienti intellettuali napoletani’, in Jean Boutier, Brigitte Marin, and Antonella Romano, eds, *Naples, Rome, Florence. Une histoire comparée des milieux intellectuels italiens (XVII–XVIIIe siècles)* (Rome: Publications de l’École française de Rome, 2005), 35–88. For the period under Viceroy Santisteban, see also Paola Setaro, ‘Una città in fermento. Gli intellettuali napoletani e il ruolo del viceré Francisco de Benavides, IX conte di Santisteban (1688–1696)’, *Pedralbes*, 41 (2021), 255–98, and in particular the appendix containing transcriptions of noteworthy documents.

examined this complex state of affairs by analysing the disputes that cut across sectors like the Church, the Spanish authorities, the aristocracy, viceregal powers and the new ruling classes. Without going into the details of the trials that followed the 1688 and 1694 earthquakes here, the information that is available makes it clear that the Church saw them as part of the social and political dispute with the Naples intelligentsia, the viceregal government and, more generally, the Hispanic Monarchy. The correspondence between the Holy See's Secretary of State, the Apostolic Nuncios and the Bishop of Naples is therefore a crucial source for the examination of the dispute.

Just as Giberti appeared to be on the point of acting on the instructions of the Roman curia, the imminent arrest of those accused of heresy was stymied by the earthquake of 5 June 1688. In fact, the emergency was not the only reason why the trial was postponed. Giberti appeared wary of applying the repressive measures ordered by Rome. He was, quite correctly, fearful of how the city, its Viceroy and its ministers might react. Suspending the trial allowed the accused to prepare their defence, and members of the legal profession as well as government bodies at all levels were able to take note of a matter that might have involved key figures. The stakes would have been very different if, for example, a powerful judge such as Francesco D'Andrea had been put on trial.

The Church's post-earthquake political activities thus took a different route from the atheism trial, both in terms of diplomatic manoeuvring and of assistance to the earthquake's victims. The Apostolic Nuncio Giovanni Muti Papazzurri, Casoni's predecessor from 1682 to 1690, played a significant role. Firstly, he provided support and assistance to Archbishop Antonio Pignatelli, who became Pope Innocent XII in 1691, to show the Church's commitment to the suffering of the populace. Secondly, he exerted relentless diplomatic pressure on the viceregal authorities to safeguard the prerogatives of the Church. As early as 26 June 1688, Cardinal Alderano Cybo, Spada's predecessor as Secretary of State from 1676 to 1689, advised Muti that Pope Innocent XI had allocated the considerable sum of 50,000 ducats to the victims of the earthquake<sup>43</sup>. The Apostolic

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43 AAV, *Segreteria di Stato, Napoli*, 340, Cybo to Muti, Rome, 26 June 1688, ff. 125r-v.

Nuncio delivered the funds to Archbishop Pignatelli, who was charged with distributing them to the victims on the basis of reports describing the damage sustained by each community. The political import of this allocation of resources and their distribution is clear. The Church was publicly assuming the role of providing material assistance alongside that of the Viceroy. Muti, along with Cardinal Marcello Durazzo, Apostolic Nuncio to Madrid, was prominent in the curious motion that led to the suspension and subsequent abolition of the *Beneficiata* game, a precursor to the lottery that was seen as a significant factor in the unleashing of divine ire in the form of an earthquake<sup>44</sup>.

The providentialist interpretation was therefore a powerful tool with which the Church could exert political pressure to increase its influence in Naples. However, the Naples and Madrid Nuncios failed to benefit in any other way from the 1688 earthquake, despite the forceful insinuation that it was linked to other catastrophes that had afflicted the Hispanic Monarchy shortly earlier, like the Catalonia revolt, corsair raids in the Caribbean, the Barbary threat in the Mediterranean and the Lima earthquake. Rome saw the divine ire as the consequence of the harm done to the Church's prerogatives. The deepest resentment was about the work of the Inquisition and the royal prerogative to appoint bishops and other senior clergy. To placate this divine ire, and as a form of compensation, the Church asked Charles II to abolish the *Tribunale di Regia Monarchia* in the Kingdom of Sicily<sup>45</sup>, which wielded an ancient right of jurisdiction conceded by the Pope to the King of Sicily. This court was particularly disliked, as it could re-examine trials initially held by Church courts and suspend or annul their sentences and excommunications. Despite the strong links between the Church and the Spanish Habsburg dynasty, and the abundant presence of clerics in the governing bodies of the state, the specific circumstances in Sicily created permanent strife over jurisdiction<sup>46</sup>,

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44 See Alessandro Tuccillo, 'Abolire il gioco per placare l'ira divina. La diplomazia pontificia e il terremoto del 1688 a Napoli', *Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche*, 51 (2021), 181–206.

45 AAV, SS, *Spagna*, 357, Cybo to Durazzo, Rome, 13 June 1688, ff. 343v–4v and Rome, 5 September 1688, ff. 382v–3v.

46 See Maria Teresa Napoli, *La Regia Monarchia di Sicilia. "Ponere falcem in alienam messem"* (Naples: Jovene, 2012); Fabrizio D'Avenia, *La Chiesa del re.*



and was a significant issue in the long history of convergence and conflict between the Holy See and the Hispanic Monarchy<sup>47</sup>. The Sannio earthquake had shifted the balance of power in favour of the Holy See but did not affect this issue. Charles II's ministers limited themselves to generic commitments to respect the Church and the clergy<sup>48</sup>. The *Tribunale di Regia Monarchia* continued to operate in Sicily for a long time despite the negotiating strength that the providentialist paradigm gave the Apostolic Nuncios.

Disputes over the prerogatives of the Church in the Kingdom of Naples and in the Hispanic Monarchy as a whole were not limited to the aftermath of the 1688 earthquake. In 1690, Giuseppe Nicola Giberti was replaced as the Inquisition's minister delegate by Giovan Battista Giberti, Bishop of Cava de' Tirreni. The trial of the atheists resumed about a year later. Several people were arrested, the Inquisition's prisons were reopened and teams of agents were formed to gather information covertly. This led to a forceful response by the some of the governing bodies of Naples – the six *Piazze* – who came together to request the Viceroy to transfer the prisoners from the prisons of the Inquisition to those of the diocese, and to banish Giberti from the Kingdom. The complaint targeted the structure of the Inquisition in the Kingdom of Naples, which consisted of bishops and archbishops coordinated by the minister delegate appointed by the Pope. This was a compromise that differed from the situation in other Italian states, where the tribunal was established as a formal body. The tribunal had become entrenched in Naples over the second half of the sixteenth century after the city's ruling bodies had, in 1510 and 1547, vehemently opposed the introduction of the Spanish Inquisition. The

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*Monarchia e papato nella Sicilia spagnola, secc. XVI–XVII* (Rome: Carocci, 2015); Daniele Palermo, 'Nel gioco delle giurisdizioni: il Tribunale della Regia Monarchia di Sicilia nel XVII secolo', *Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche*, 50 (2020), 697–716. On the role of clerics in the institutions of Spanish Italy, see Elisa Novi Chavarria, ed., 'Ecclesiastici al servizio del Re tra Italia e Spagna (secc. XVI–XVII)', *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, 2 (2015).

47 See Maria Antonietta Visceglia, 'Convergencias y conflictos. La Monarquía católica y la Santa sede (siglos XVI–XVIII)', *Studia historica. Historia moderna*, 26 (2004), 155–90.

48 AAV, SS, *Spagna*, 167, Durazzo to Cybo, Madrid, 19 August 1688, ff. 532r–3r.

minister delegate and the bishops reported directly to the Roman curia on Inquisition matters, which led to frequent conflicts over responsibilities with respect to secular and normal ecclesiastic courts. The Inquisition was a secretive institution. Prosecutors were anonymous, the accused were not made aware of the accusations against them and were imprisoned without being able to prepare a defence. They were also often tortured into providing false confessions. Procedures of this kind were not unknown under the ancien régime, but the Inquisition's interference in the civil, religious and political affairs of the Kingdom of Naples created a permanent state of tension between State and Church which was only partially resolved over the course of the eighteenth century when Charles of Bourbon tried to proscribe the institution<sup>49</sup>.

The requests made by the Naples *Piazze* to banish Giberti and to have religious trials heard by diocesan courts, thereby giving the accused greater rights, not only enjoyed popular support but also felt like a direct attack on the Church. Viceroy Santisteban acceded to these requests without waiting for a response from Madrid, despite the protestations of Archbishop Cantelmo, pressure from the Nuncios and the threat of a papal interdict being laid on the city by Innocent XII. With Giberti banished, Rome assigned the coordination of Inquisition activities to Archbishop Cantelmo. Although this looked like a victory for the *Piazze*, the Archbishop zealously proceeded with the trial of the atheists, including the use of harsh interrogations and public abjuration, and imposing the first prison sentences. Moreover, in conjunction with pressure from the Apostolic Nuncio Casoni, he urged Santisteban to suppress the spread of the 'doctrine of the atoms' and in particular to re-establish the authority of the Inquisition and its minister delegate.

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49 On the Inquisition in the Kingdom of Naples, see Luigi Amabile, *Il Santo Ufficio dell'Inquisizione in Napoli. Narrazione con molti documenti inediti* (Città di Castello: Lapi, 1892), 2 vols.; Giovanni Romeo, 'Una città, due inquisizioni. L'anomalia del Sant'Ufficio a Napoli nel tardo '500', *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa*, 24 (1988), 42–67; Elisa Novi Chavarria, 'Procedure inquisitoriali e potere politico a Napoli (1550–1640)', in *I primi Lincei e il Sant'Ufficio: questioni di scienza e di fede* (Rome: Bardi, 2005), 31–46; Pasquale Palmieri, 'Il lento tramonto del Sant'Ufficio. La giustizia ecclesiastica nel Regno di Napoli durante il secolo XVIII', *Rivista storica italiana*, 123 (2011), 26–60.

It was against the backdrop of this bitter political and jurisdictional conflict that the earthquake of 8 September 1694 struck. Once again, the providentialist paradigm provided the Church with a forceful argument to demand the preservation of its prerogatives in the Kingdom of Naples. The widespread view that divine intervention had triggered the earthquake made it easy to insinuate that the causes could be found in the spread of modern philosophical notions and the unprecedented opposition to the Inquisition. Archbishop Cantelmo raised these matters with Viceroy Santisteban on 20 September. Cantelmo himself reports this in an important letter sent to Secretary of State Spada to notify him that the annual miracle of the liquefaction of San Gennaro's blood had taken place<sup>50</sup>, adding with some satisfaction that the Viceroy shared his aversion to the 'doctrine of the atoms', and that he was therefore considering closing the 'the private schools where this pernicious seed is being cultivated'. The harmony was shattered, however, when the Archbishop suggested that the spread of atomism could be stemmed by 'reinstating the Inquisition and its minister'. The Viceroy apparently adopted a non-committal attitude to this suggestion<sup>51</sup>.

Although the outcome was therefore far from what Cantelmo had been hoping for, the substance of the conversation was noted with some interest in the correspondence between Rome and Madrid. As soon as he received the letter from Naples, Secretary of State Spada wrote to Archbishop Fabrizio Caccia, the Apostolic Nuncio to the court of Charles II. He expressed his astonishment at the Viceroy's approach. He saw the idea of 'banning the private schools' as an inadequate measure to contain

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50 San Gennaro (St Januarius) was a patron saint of Naples and venerated as the city's protector against disasters, in particular the eruptions of Mount Vesuvius. He is famous for the recurrent miracle of the liquefaction of his blood, conserved in a vial in the Cathedral of Naples. The event is seen as a good omen. There is a vast body of literature on the subject. See, for example, Francesco Paolo de Ceglia, *Il segreto di san Gennaro. Storia naturale di un miracolo napoletano* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016). On the relationship between saints, veneration and the handling of disasters in the early modern period, see Milena Viceconte, Gennaro Schiano, and Domenico Cecere, eds, *Heroes in Dark Times. Saints and Officials Tackling Disaster, 16th–17th Centuries* (Rome: Viella, 2023).

51 AAV, SS, *Cardinali*, 59, Cantelmo to Spada, Naples, 21 September 1694, ff. 239r–v.

the spread of the ‘evil seed’ of the ‘doctrine of the atoms’. The only ‘essential remedy’ was ‘to reinstate the Holy Office’. This would have the added advantage of preventing further manifestations of divine ire after the earthquake of 8 September: ‘it is to be believed that God, justifiably enraged, made this Kingdom tremble with [...] yet another punishment’. The letter closed with an exhortation to the Nuncio to strive to convince Charles II and his ministers of the need for the ‘immediate reintegration of the Holy Tribunal into this Kingdom’<sup>52</sup>.

### 5. In defence of ‘God’s ordering wisdom’

At the end of the day, the earthquake threat served as an argument of political pressure for the Church. However, it would be misleading to reduce the issue simply to a means to an end. The providentialist paradigm was truly dominant and reiterated by all sides in communications at all levels.

Cantelmo replied to Spada in a letter dated 28 September 1694, informing him that he had received the document pertaining to the plenary indulgence granted by Pope Innocent XII to allow the people of Naples to mend their ways and ‘placate the divine indignation manifested by the last earthquake’. His view, however, was that avoiding a ‘repetition of divine punishment’ could not be taken for granted. The ‘only valid way’ to counter the ‘evil’ of the atomist heresy was ‘to reinstate the Holy Office and its minister’<sup>53</sup>. This request remained a bone of contention between the Church and the representatives of the Hispanic Monarchy, but trepidation about the spread of the novel concepts was shared by the viceregal authorities. This can be seen in the conversation between Cantelmo and Santisteban, and also in Parrino’s official *relazione*. The *relazione* was intended for wide distribution, and its attack on naturalistic explanations of the earthquake, an attack validated by the poetry of Ciro di Pers, reiterated a line of argumentation designed to resolve the issue of the cause of earthquakes as divine intervention. Even in the socio-political context of late seventeenth-century Naples where the providentialist paradigm was

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52 AAV, SS, *Spagna*, 358, Spada to Caccia, Rome, 26 September 1694, ff. 150v–1r.

53 AAV, SS, *Cardinali*, 59, Cantelmo to Spada, Naples, 28 September 1694, f. 241r.

dominant, debate on the origins and causes of earthquakes revealed conflicting interpretations and became the locus of socio-political conflict.

It should be emphasised that this conflict was not based simply on the antagonism of two opposing camps. There was continuous mediation. Moreover, the Thomist compromise between the Aristotelian account of the naturalist interpretation of earthquakes and the divine origin of natural events allowed Christianity to come to terms with even the most groundbreaking aspects of scientific inquiry. Parrino himself had published Domenico Bottone's *Pyrologia topographica* in 1692, with a dedication to Viceroy Santisteban<sup>54</sup>. This treatise on fire did not fail to cite the theories of Giovanni Alfonso Borelli, a scientist of the Galilean school, and the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher, who integrated the Aristotelian and Thomist accounts of earthquakes by reducing them to conflagrations and explosions of combustible matter located underground or in the deep bowels of the earth. However, when the socio-political strife became acute, especially when this happened in public view, positions became polarised and the providentialist paradigm became a useful way to extend and safeguard the prerogatives of the Church.

For a historian, the conflict provides exceptionally fertile ground for research. The role of the providentialist paradigm is central to the friction between the Church and scientific, philosophical and political doctrines that might challenge its role in society. In the seventeenth century, this battle was waged from a dominant position that allowed any hypothesis of a naturalistic interpretation to be repudiated. By the early twentieth century, however, divine intervention could only be considered the 'first cause' that triggered the mechanisms of nature. This explains the coherence of *La Civiltà Cattolica* informing its readers about the latest developments in seismology<sup>55</sup> in one article and lauding 'God's ordering wisdom' in another on the 1908 earthquake:

Queste forze e queste leggi sono uscite dalla onnipotenza e dalla sapienza ordinatrice di Dio, che ne è sempre il sovrano e le domina, e le governa, e le

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54 Domenico Bottone, *Pyrologia topographica. Id est dissertatio de igne iuxta loca cum eorum descriptione* (Naples: Domenico Antonio Parrino – Michele Aloisio Muzio, 1692).

55 'Un po' di sismologia', *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 60/1406 (1909), 218–27.

indirizza a fini eccelsi di ordine morale. Questa è la sola vera filosofia delle umane calamità<sup>56</sup>.

[These forces and these laws derive from God's omnipotence and his ordering wisdom, which He always rules and dominates, and governs, and directs towards sublime ends of moral order. This is the only true philosophy of human calamities].

As in the seventeenth century, what was at stake was the fear that God might be excised from human society, which could only lead to the gradual reduction of the importance of the Church's role. The issue of what causes earthquakes reveals a much broader conflict, one that has quite clearly not been resolved to this day.

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56 'Sfruttamento settario della sventura', 398.