

through the attempts to reconstruct the Church of England according to presbyterian principles.

Other evidence helps sketch out a cultural context which at least makes Bacon's interest in Spira's story comprehensible, even if his decision to publish a version of it suggests a special personal significance. Existing manuscripts of Bacon's version indicate a date of composition before 1628 and circulation amongst an educated, theologically literate group which may be further particularised by the sharing of puritan and parliamentary sympathies. That Spira's story was current amongst puritan clergy who were contemporaries or near contemporaries of Bacon is shown by references to it in works by Perkins, Preston, Sibbes, William Gouge and Robert Bolton, which seem to assume by their typical brevity that readers or hearers already possessed a knowledge of at least its main outlines.

The subject of the biography, a lawyer named Francesco Spira of Citadella, near Padua, became a celebrity amongst Protestants in the mid sixteenth century. After becoming prominent in his profession and wealthy (by his own confession) by unscrupulous means, he became interested in protestant teaching, read avidly and was convinced of its truthfulness; he made his convictions public and was soon required to present himself in Venice for examination. Although he prepared himself to resist the pressures which he knew would be applied to him by the ecclesiastical authorities, he did submit and signed a recantation, which he was required to repeat publicly.

After the first recantation he heard a voice which said, 'Spira, what dost thou here?... take heed that thou heapest not sin upon sin, lest thou repent when it will be too late.' At his second recantation the voice was adamant: 'Thou wicked wretch, thou hast denied me... hence Apostate, bear with thee the sentence of thy eternal damnation.'² Convinced that he was indeed an apostate from the truth and had no hope of salvation, he refused to take any action to maintain his life, affirming that he had been rejected by God and was, even before death, one of the damned. His circumstances rapidly became a matter of public knowledge, and his residence in Padua, where he had been taken in case the combined resources of medicine and theology could in any way achieve his recovery or alter his conviction of his damnation, became a place of resort. He engaged in passionate debate with the theologians, turned his face to the wall when a priest tried using the ritual of exorcism, and died absolutely convinced of his damnation.

From the beginning Francesco Spira's apostasy was a matter of international interest. The eye-witness accounts of his despair, published in 1549 almost immediately after his death, were written by