

The Burning of the Racovian Catechism in Jacobean England: A Four-Century-Old Historical Myth

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Abstract. The Racovian Catechism is a famous summa of Socinian thought. It was written in the early seventeenth century by several members of the Minor Reformed Church of Poland, also known as the Polish Brethren, who were close associates of the Italian anti-Trinitarian Faustus Socinus and had their academy and press in the Polish village of Rakow. The first edition of the Catechism, written in Polish, was published in 1605 at Rakow, thanks to the efforts of Valentinus Smalcius, Hieronymus Moscorovius, and Johannes Volkelius. That edition was followed by a German translation in 1608 and a Latin edition in 1609, both printed at Rakow. The Latin edition was dedicated to James VI of Scotland & I of England, who was addressed as a preeminent theologian in a prefatory epistle by Moscorovius. Since James was then the most powerful Protestant ruler in Europe, it is likely that the Socinians hoped to gain his favor. But, if so, they were to be disappointed. Indeed, James reacted angrily to the dedication of that anti-Trinitarian book to him. It is a common misconception that the Racovian Catechism was also consigned to the flames in England in 1614. Nevertheless, neither contemporary sources, nor the context of Anglo-Polish political and cultural relationships in the early seventeenth century provide any evidence of that burning. Instead, the erroneous assumption that the Catechism was ordered to be burned during King James's reign is the result of a series of misinterpretations and mistranslations of primary sources. Starting with the works of some anti-Socinian writers in the seventeenth century, such misinterpretations and mistranslations have led to further misunderstandings in historiography on anti-Trinitarianism. In the end, the specious claim that the Racovian Catechism was burned in Jacobean England has become common knowledge among historians, thus producing an emblematic example of myth-making in history.