

***Choosing the Lesser Evil:
The Holy Office, the Jews and Voltaire. Censorship Notes on
La difesa de' libri santi e della religione giudaica (Venice, 1770)***¹

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Disciplining Books and Ideas: Old and New Problems for the Catholic Church

In the eighteenth century, the Catholic Church was called on to deal with profound intellectual and cultural changes linked to the Enlightenment movement.² A useful lens through which to view how it addressed some of these challenges is the complex system of cultural control it exerted, namely through censorship and the activity of the Holy Office. The repression of books shows that the Catholic Church sought to contrast a specific kind of literature, one which also conveyed new concepts and ideas.³ In Italy, *philosophique* works became increasingly widespread during the eighteenth century, and this new problem for the Church was added to the older one concerning the Jews and the books they possessed. The case study I present here covers these two issues and concerns the Catholic Church's attitude towards Jews, the Enlightenment and books that conveyed a new approach to religion in the general framework of ecclesiastical control over the circulation of books in late eighteenth-century Italy. The existence of contrasting visions and conflicting interpretations allows us to identify a highly complex institutional censorship system.⁴ Some aspects of this system surface

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² For an overview of the Catholic Church's response, see DANIELE MENOZZI, 'Il cattolicesimo dal concilio di Trento al Vaticano II,' in *Cristianesimo*, ed. GIOVANNI FILORAMO (Bari: Laterza, 2000), 314–19. In relation also to the second Protestant expansion see UMBERTO MAZZONE, 'La seconda espansione protestante (1648-1789),' in *Storia del Cristianesimo*, 4 vols., vol. 3, *L'età moderna (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, ed. VINCENZO LAVENIA (Rome: Carocci, 2015), 298–318, especially 312–18; VINCENZO LAVENIA, *Storia della Chiesa*, 4 vols., vol. 3, *L'età moderna* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2020), 267–330, especially 297–310.

³ It should be noted that, as Giorgio Caravale recently stressed, 'L'idea che esistesse un nesso strettissimo tra l'eretico e il filosofo, tra Lutero e Voltaire, tra Calvino e d'Holbach, tra l'eresia protestante e la filosofia del Lumi fu centrale nella cultura censoria dell'epoca' (The idea that there was a very close link between the heretic and the philosopher, between Luther and Voltaire, between Calvin and d'Holbach, and between Protestant heresy and the philosophy of the Enlightenment was central to the censorship culture of the time). GIORGIO CARVALE, *Libri pericolosi. Censura e cultura italiana in età moderna* (Bari: Laterza, 2022), 87–103 (102). All translations from Italian are mine.

⁴ Regarding some aspects of the conflicts and complexities of the institutional system of censorship, see CARVALE, *Libri pericolosi*; GIGLIOLA FRAGRITO, *La Bibbia al rogo. La censura ecclesiastica e i volgarizzamenti*

in the episode described here, a case which offers an example of Catholic control of books dating back to this period. The case study at the centre of this paper concerns a book that was seized in Ancona (a port city in central Italy): *La difesa de' libri santi e della religione giudaica contro le imputazioni e varie dicerie del sig. di Voltaire*, anonymously published in Venice in 1770.⁵ I will interrogate the *censure*, that is, the censorship notes that the Roman Holy Office produced and, accordingly, the distinct judgements and opinions expressed on the book's content. The documents consulted for this analysis are held at the Archives for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Holy Office) in Rome and presented here for the first time.⁶

Almost twenty-five years have passed since scholars were first allowed to consult the Roman Archive of the Holy Office. In January 1998, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—Prefect of the Sacra Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei and future Pope Benedict XVI (from 2005 to 2013)—ordered the Archives of the Holy Office to be officially opened in accordance with the proposal made by Pope John Paul II (pope from 1978 to 2005).⁷ The archive is composed of an extraordinary variety of documents, including the important documentary collection of the so-called *Censurae Librorum*.⁸ As is well known, this collection includes letters of denunciation, votes by those employed at the Holy Office, and reports and acts transmitted to the Sacred Congregation of the Index. It also contains documents regarding the examination and evaluation of books, both manuscripts and printed books, which were subjected to the control exercised directly by the Holy Office. Handwritten or printed copies of the works examined by the Office are often attached to the documentation in question. The *Censurae Librorum* collection therefore contains a rich vein of information about the ways in which censors at the Holy Office performed their tasks. One file in the collection recounts the episodes reported here, thereby allowing us to follow the

della Scrittura (1471-1605) (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997); MARIO INFELISE, *I padroni dei libri. Il controllo sulla stampa nella prima età moderna*, repr. (2014; Bari: Laterza, 2019).

⁵ The full title page reads *La difesa de' libri santi e della religione giudaica contro le imputazioni e varie dicerie del sig. di Voltaire. Contenuta in varie Lettere e Riflessioni corredate ed illustrate con Note critiche, oltre un piccolo Comento estratto da altro maggiore. Opera tradotta dall'idioma francese. Utilissima e necessaria per l'intelligenza delle Sacre Scritture* (Venice: Giuseppe Bettinelli, 1770). The title can be translated in English as *The Defence of the Holy Books and the Jewish Religion against the imputations and various rumours of Mr. Voltaire, contained in various letters, and Reflections accompanied by and illustrated with critical notes, plus a small commentary extracted from another major [one]. Work translated from French. Useful and necessary for the understanding of the Holy Scriptures*.

⁶ Henceforth ACDF, SO.

⁷ Concerning the opening of the Archive, see *L'apertura degli archivi del Sant'Uffizio romano. Atti dei convegni lincei 142 (Giornata di studio, Roma 22 gennaio 1998)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1998); *L'Inquisizione e gli storici: un cantiere aperto. Atti dei convegni lincei 162 (Roma, 24–25 giugno 1999)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2000); *Le inquisizioni cristiane e gli ebrei. Atti dei convegni lincei 191 (Roma, 20–21 dicembre 2001)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2003); *A dieci anni dall'apertura dell'Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede. Storia e archivi dell'Inquisizione* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2011); *L'Inquisizione romana e i suoi archivi. A vent'anni dall'apertura dell'ACDF. Atti del convegno (Roma, 15–17 maggio 2018)*, ed. ALEJANDRO CIFRES (Rome: Gangemi, 2019). At the time of writing, the documents from the historical archives that were accessible were those that had been deposited prior to the end of the pontificate of Pius XII (1939–1958).

⁸ Henceforth CL.

censors as they examined texts. More precisely, we can trace the construction of the—sometimes blurred—boundaries between what was permitted and what was not.⁹

The dissemination of the theories and concepts of the so-called ‘increduli’ (unbelievers), a term also used to refer to the intellectual representatives known today as Enlighteners, understandably falls into the category of not-permitted. The congregations of the two tribunals of reading, the Index and the Holy Office/Inquisition, implemented various strategies of governance and prohibition (e.g. the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, Index of Prohibited Books) aimed at countering the propagation of new ideas, ideas which often came from across the Alps.¹⁰ To exemplify the fight against the *Lumières*, it is important to mention that the Index of Prohibited Books in which many Enlightenment books were gradually included was continuously updated.¹¹ Furthermore, the Catholic Church was tasked with condemning the new ideas, as it did through the encyclical *Christianae reipublicae* that Clement XIII (pope from 1758 to 1769) published in 1766; here, the ‘pestifero contagio dei libri’ (pestiferous contagion of books) is strongly condemned because it is considered a vehicle of ‘esecrabile errore’ (execrable error).¹² The same concern is discernible in the first encyclical of the newly elected Pope Pius VI (from 1775 to 1799), *Inscrutabile divinae sapientiae*, published in 1775. This text reproaches and condemns those ‘filosofi sciagurati’ (deplorable philosophers) who—along with other inadmissible errors—proclaim that ‘l’uomo nasce libero e non è soggetto a nessuno’ (man is born free and is subject to no one).¹³ In both encyclicals, there is a clear awareness that the new philosophy, this ‘funesto contagio’ (baleful contamination),¹⁴ is transmitted and takes hold through the reading of books. To cope with the advance of Enlightenment thought and publications, the Catholic Church was also concerned with making a shift from repressive to persuasive techniques, such as by refuting the ideas of the forbidden books listed in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* and making translations of anti-

⁹ The documents on the events described here were taken from ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), ff. 1r–119v. For a brief description, see HUBERT WOLF, ed., *Systematisches Repertorium zur Buchzensur 1701–1813*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Inquisition* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009), 457–62.

¹⁰ ANDREA DEL COL, *L’Inquisizione in Italia. Dal XII al XXI secolo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), 699–740, especially 711–29; STEFANIA VALERI, *Libri nuovi scendon l’Alpi. Venti anni di relazioni franco-italiane negli archivi della Société typographique de Neuchâtel (1769–1789)* (Macerata: EUM, 2006); PATRIZIA DELPIANO, ‘Illuminismo,’ in *Dizionario storico dell’Inquisizione*, eds ADRIANO PROSPERI, VINCENZO LAVENIA, and JOHN TEDESCHI, 4 vols., vol. 2 (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2010), 761–64. For a general overview of the Enlightenment book trade see MARK CURRAN, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe I: Selling Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

¹¹ MOGENS LAERKE, *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); MARIO INFELISE, *I libri proibiti. Da Gutenberg all’Encyclopedie* (Bari: Laterza 2013), 114–20; CATHERINE MAIRE, ‘L’entrée des ‘Lumières’ à l’Index: le tournant de la double censure de l’Encyclopédie en 1759,’ *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 42, no. 1 (2007): 108–39.

¹² *Enchiridion delle Encicliche*, 8 vols., vol. 1, *Benedetto XIV, Clemente XIII, Clemente XIV, Pio VI, Pio VII, Leone XII, Pio VIII (1740–1830)* (Bologna: Edizioni dehoniane, 1994), 946–55 (946–47).

¹³ *Enchiridion delle Encicliche*, 1070–89 (1080–81).

¹⁴ *Enchiridion delle Encicliche*, 1070–89 (1082–83).

philosophique works.¹⁵ In addition to already institutionalised practices, the Church deployed men of letters to defend its intellectual hegemony and *patrimonium fidei*. In Italy, books published to contrast Voltaire's philosophical production included the *Dissertazioni* (1780) by Emanuele da Domodossola, *La religione vincitrice* (1756) and *La verità della Chiesa* (1787) by Antonio Valsecchi, the Italian translations of Claude-François Nonnotte's book *Gli errori di Voltaire* (1773), and a work by Charles-Louis Richard titled *Voltaire fra l'ombra* (1777).¹⁶

This unprecedented problem emerged alongside the older and more long-standing one concerning the Jews. As is well known, the Catholic Church—including through the work of the Holy Office—carried out a series of operations to control the Jews and their written production, the main aim of which was essentially conversion. The Church's attitude toward Jews in the Papal States is also evident in the establishment of the ghetto and Casa dei Catecumeni (House of Catechumens) during the sixteenth century.¹⁷ Although the Catholic fight against the Talmud is one of the best-known examples in historiography,¹⁸ the campaign against Hebrew books also

¹⁵ PATRIZIA DELPIANO, *Il governo della lettura: chiesa e libri nell'Italia del Settecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007). Also available in English translation: *Church and Censorship in Eighteenth-Century Italy: Governing Reading in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁶ DELPIANO, *Il governo della lettura*, 217–30; DIDIER MASSEAU, *Les ennemis des philosophes. L'antiphilosophie au temps des Lumières* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000); DARRIN MCMAHON, *Enemies of the Enlightenment. The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); PATRIZIA DELPIANO, 'Censure et guerre des livres: l'antiphilosophie, de la France à l'Italie,' in *La traduction comme dispositif de communication dans l'Europe moderne*, ed. PATRICE BRET and JEANNE PEIFFER (Paris: Hermann, 2020), 117–34; PATRIZIA DELPIANO, 'Libri e letture nella cultura antiphilosophique,' in *Il libro. Editoria e pratiche di lettura nel Settecento*, eds LODOVICA BRAIDA and SILVIA TAITI (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2016), 27–38.

¹⁷ Regarding the sixteenth century, see KENNETH STOW, *Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy 1555-1593* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977). Concerning the eighteenth century, see MARIO ROSA, 'Tra tolleranza e repressione: Roma e gli ebrei nel '700,' in *Italia Judaica. Gli ebrei in Italia dalla segregazione alla prima emancipazione. Atti del III Convegno internazionale. Tel Aviv 15-20 giugno 1986* (Rome: Ministero per i Beni culturali e ambientali, 1989), 81–98; MARIO ROSA, 'La Santa Sede e gli ebrei nel Settecento,' in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 11. Gli Ebrei in Italia*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Gli ebrei in Italia: dall'Emancipazione a oggi*, ed. CORRADO VIVANTI (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 1067–87; KENNETH STOW, *Anna and Tranquillo: Catholic Anxiety and Jewish Protest in the Age of Revolutions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). For general overviews, see MICHELE LUZZATI, ed., *L'Inquisizione e gli ebrei in Italia* (Bari: Laterza, 1994); MARINA CAFFIERO, *Legami pericolosi. Ebrei e cristiani tra eresia, libri proibiti e stregoneria* (Turin: Einaudi, 2012); SERENA DI NEPI, *Sopravvivere al ghetto. Per una storia sociale della comunità ebraica nella Roma del Cinquecento* (Rome: Viella, 2013); MARINA CAFFIERO, *Storia degli ebrei nell'Italia moderna. Dal Rinascimento alla Restaurazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2014); MARINA CAFFIERO, ed., *L'Inquisizione e gli ebrei. Nuove ricerche* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2021).

¹⁸ FAUSTO PARENTE, 'La Chiesa e il "Talmud": l'atteggiamento della Chiesa e del mondo cristiano nei confronti del "Talmud" e degli altri scritti rabbinici con particolare riguardo all'Italia tra XV e XVI secolo,' in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 11. Gli Ebrei in Italia*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Dall'alto Medioevo all'età dei ghetti*, ed. CORRADO VIVANTI (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), 521–643; KENNETH STOW, 'The Burning of the Talmud in 1553, in the Light of Sixteenth Century Catholic Attitudes toward the Talmud,' *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 34, no. 3 (1972): 435–59; PIET VAN BOXEL, 'Hebrew Books and Censorship in Sixteenth-Century Italy,' in *Jewish Books and their Readers*, eds SCOTT MANDELBORE and JOANNA WEINBERG (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 73–99.

involved many other literary works.¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that, in the first half of the eighteenth century, Clement XII (pope from 1730 to 1740) issued an edict on Jews (in 1733) in which the very first clauses focused specifically on Hebrew books; this demonstrates the attempt to ban the Talmud and other works deemed dangerous because they contained material considered offensive to Christianity. This focus reveals the Catholic Church's intense concern for books and the written production of the Jews. Moreover, the edict was republished by Benedict XIV (pope from 1740 to 1758) in 1751 and by Pius VI in 1775, and then again at the end of the eighteenth century (1793).²⁰

The Book on Trial: *La difesa de' libri santi*

The book about which the censorship notes were written is not a Hebrew book *stricto sensu*, but it does concern Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, as we will see, it was read by Jews and allegedly written mainly by Jews. Its title page reads *La difesa de' libri santi e della religione giudaica contro le imputazioni e varie dicerie del sig. di Voltaire. Contenuta in varie Lettere e Riflessioni corredate ed illustrate con Note critiche, oltre un piccolo Comento estratto da altro maggiore. Opera tradotta dall'idioma francese*. The work appeared in Venice and rolled off the presses of the publisher Giuseppe Bettinelli in 1770,²¹ without any indication of the author or translator. The original French version, titled *Lettres de quelques juifs portugais et allemands, à M. de Voltaire*, was published *sine nomine* by the Parisian printer Laurent Prault in 1769 and accompanied by Christian notes.²² This work was prepared by Antoine Guénée (1717–1803), a French priest and Christian apologist.²³ Soon recognised even by Voltaire himself, who—in a disparaging tone—apostrophised him as ‘M. le professeur secretaire des juifs,’²⁴ Guénée was involved in a fierce counter-attack launched by certain French Catholic clerics, such as Nicolas

¹⁹ ABRAHAM BERLINER, *Censur und Confiscation hebräischer Bücher im Kirchenstaate* (Frankfurt: J. Kauffmann, 1891); WILLIAM POPPER, *The Censorship of Hebrew Books* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1899); MAURO PERANI, ‘Censura, sequestri e roghi di libri ebraici,’ in *Dizionario storico dell’Inquisizione*, eds ADRIANO PROSPERI, VINCENZO LAVENIA, and JOHN TEDESCHI, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2010), 319–23; CAFFIERO, *Legami pericolosi*, 44–77.

²⁰ For more on this topic, see ATTILIO MILANO, ‘L’Editto sopra gli ebrei di Pio VI e le mene ricattatorie di un letterato,’ *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 19, no. 2 (1953): 65–80; ATTILIO MILANO, *Storia degli ebrei in Italia*, 2nd ed. (1963; Turin: Einaudi, 1992), 296–96; PAOLO ELIA, ‘I fratelli Verri e l’editto di Pio VI,’ *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 43, no. 3–4 (1977): 133–36.

²¹ Regarding the bookmaking activity of Bettinelli’s family, see MARIO INFELISE, *L’editoria veneziana nel ’700* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1989), *ad indicem*. For a discussion of the Venice book market, see INFELISE, *L’editoria veneziana nel ’700*. The book market did not come to a halt, despite Catholic control. It should also be noted that a number of unauthorised volumes came from the Venetian Republic and that this led the Roman Inquisition, at least from 1762 to 1767, to take action by demanding strict control of the printers. As mentioned above, *La difesa de’ libri santi* was printed in Venice. See PATRIZIA DELPIANO, ‘Il controllo ecclesiastico della lettura nell’Italia dei Lumi,’ in *La censura nel secolo dei Lumi. Una visione internazionale*, ed. EDOARDO TORTAROLO (Turin: Utet, 2011), 65–93, especially 80.

²² ANTOINE GUÉNÉE, *Lettres de quelques juifs portugais et allemands, à M. de Voltaire, avec des reflection critiques, &c. Et un petit Commentaire extrait d’un plus grand* (Lisbonne-Paris: Laurent Prault, 1769).

²³ FRANK E. MANUEL, *The Broken Staff: Judaism through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 234–38. Regarding certain aspects of its reception, see PAUL BENHAMOU, ‘Antiphilosophes éclairés et le Juifs,’ in *L’Antisémitisme Éclairé: Inclusion et Exclusion depuis l’Époque des Lumières jusqu’à l’affaire Dreyfus*, eds ILANA ZINGUER and SAM BLOOM (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 61–76.

²⁴ BENHAMOU, ‘Antiphilosophes éclairés et le Juifs,’ 68.

Sylvestre Bergier (1718–1790) and Henri Grégoire (1750–1831), against the philosopher’s view of ancient Judaism.²⁵

The Italian version appeared as a free translation of the French edition.²⁶ The book contains several letters said to have been written by Jews in response to certain issues that Voltaire had raised against the Bible and Jews. Some letters were derived from the *Apologie pour la nation juive* (1762) by the Dutch Jew Isaac de Pinto (1717–1787),²⁷ whereas the other missives were presumably written by Guénée himself. Voltaire’s arguments, which the book criticised and sought to counter, are mainly contained in his works *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763), *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) and *La Philosophie de l’histoire* (1765).²⁸ Voltaire responded to Guénée’s French text in *Un chrétien contre six juifs ou Réfutation d’un livre intitulé, Lettres de Quelques Juifs Portugais, Allemands, et Polonais* (1777).²⁹ As is well known, Voltaire was one of the most anti-Semitic philosophers of all Enlightenment thinkers and made considerable efforts to express his negative views of Jews and Judaism.³⁰

²⁵ MANUEL, *The Broken Staff*, 238–47; JEFFREY D. BURSON, ‘The Catholic Enlightenment in France from the Fin de Siècle Crisis of Consciousness to the Revolution, 1650–1789,’ in *A Companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe*, eds ULRICH LEHNER and MICHAEL PRINTY (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 63–125; SYLVIANE ALBERTAN-COPPOLA, *L’abbé Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier, 1718–1790: des Monts-Jura à Versailles, le parcours d’un apologiste du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010); ALYSSA GOLDSTEIN SEPINWALL, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

²⁶ *La difesa de’ libri santi* was sometimes wrongly identified as a translation of *Défense des livres de l’Ancien testament* (1767) by Joseph-Guillaume Clémence (1717–1792). For a discussion of some aspects of translating books into Italian during the Enlightenment, see CARVALE, *Libri pericolosi*, 229–33; PATRIZIA DELPIANO, *Liberi di scrivere. La battaglia per la stampa nell’età dei Lumi* (Bari: Laterza, 2015), 158–64. Further bibliography in note 16 above.

²⁷ ISAAC DE PINTO, *Apologie pour la nation juive ou Réflexions critiques sur le premier chapitre du VII tome des Oeuvres de Monsieur de Voltaire au sujet des Juifs* (Amsterdam: J. Joubert, 1762). Isaac de Pinto was also a philosopher and economist. Pinto’s main work on economics is the *Traité de la circulation et du crédit* (Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey, 1771). ADAM SUTCLIFFE, ‘Can a Jew Be a Philosophe? Isaac de Pinto, Voltaire, and Jewish Participation in the European Enlightenment,’ *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 3 (2000): 31–51; ADAM SUTCLIFFE, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 244–45.

²⁸ As is well known, Voltaire’s body of writings was soon listed in the Index. JESÚS MARTÍNEZ DE BUJANDA, *Index Librorum Prohibitorum 1600-1966* (Montréal: Médiaspaul; Genève: Droz, 2002), 928–32.

²⁹ The first title of Voltaire’s response was *Le Vieillard du Mont Caucase aux juifs portugais, allemands, et polonais*, later titled *Un chrétien contre six juifs ou Réfutation d’un livre intitulé, Lettres de Quelques Juifs Portugais, Allemands, et Polonais*. AARON GARRETT, ‘Human Nature,’ in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. KNUD HAAKONSSON, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 160–233, especially 187; ADAM SUTCLIFFE, ‘Voltaire in Context: The Emergence of Antijudaic Rhetoric in the French Early Enlightenment,’ in *L’Antisémitisme Éclairé*, eds ZINGUER and BLOOM, 115–24.

³⁰ The bibliography on the subject is extensive. By way of example, see LÉON POLIAKOV, *Histoire de l’antisémitisme*, 4 vols., vol. 3, *De Voltaire à Wagner* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1968), 103–17; ARTHUR HERTZBERG, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); MANUEL, *The Broken Staff*, 193–201. It is important to emphasise that the question of Voltaire’s anti-Semitism sparks controversy due to its intricate connection with his critique of positive religions, including Christianity. ADAM SUTCLIFFE, ‘Myth, Origins, Identity: Voltaire, the Jews, and the Enlightenment Notion of Toleration,’ *The Eighteenth Century* 39, no. 2 (1998): 107–26; RONALD SCHECHTER, ‘Rationalizing the Enlightenment: Postmodernism and Theories of Anti-Semitism,’ in *Postmodernism and the French Enlightenment*, ed. DANIEL GORDON, special issue, *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 25, no. 2 (1999): 279–306; DAVID NIRENBERG, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

La difesa de' libri santi is divided into three main sections. The first part mainly contains an apologia for the civil and moral honesty of the Jews, especially Portuguese and Spanish contemporaries, derived from a work by Isaac de Pinto.³¹ Indeed, this section appears more as a defence of the merits of Sephardic Jews than of Judaism in general. The main theme is Voltaire's description of the Jewish people as a barbarous, ignorant and superstitious people. *La difesa de' libri santi* argues that a distinction must be made between Spanish and Portuguese Jews, who descend directly from the Tribe of Judah, and other Jews, for example those of Polish and German origins.³² According to the text, Voltaire should have recognised the significant difference between the elegant and cultured Sephardic Jews and the uncivilised Jews from other nations.³³ Unfortunate as they were, they should not be subjected to further discrimination, especially if it was being called for by the greatest genius of the century, namely Voltaire.³⁴ The tone of this reaction to Voltaire is often laudatory, but it does not fail to accuse him of being a slanderer. Voltaire's reply, which was included in the text, promised a retraction, but this never happened.³⁵

The second part essentially responds to a note that Voltaire had inserted in the *Traité sur la tolérance* regarding the books of Moses.³⁶ The letters addressed to Voltaire by those who qualify as Polish and German Jews from Amsterdam are intended to defend the authority of the Pentateuch and the memory of Jewish ancestors.³⁷ Voltaire's note is quoted in its entirety, and the refutation is intended to analyse—point by point—the accusations that Moses could not possibly have written the books of the Pentateuch and the improbability of the events involving the Golden Calf and the ensuing punishment.³⁸ For example, Voltaire questioned the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch on the basis of the fact that, in Moses's time, it was only possible to write on stone, brick, lead, and wood, but these suppositions in no way eliminate the possibility that Moses accomplished the task.³⁹ Furthermore, the letters aim to question Voltaire's infamous accusation of the alleged bestiality of ancient Jews. Voltaire argues that sexual immorality was so common among Jews that it led to severe prohibitions against these practices. What Voltaire considered testimony of the inherent depravity of the people of Israel, the letters argue, instead served to protect the Jews from immoral external influences.⁴⁰

The third part deals with various issues relating to the defence of divine revelation and Jewish law, contained in the *Traité sur la tolérance* and *La Philosophie de*

³¹ ISAAC DE PINTO, *Apologie pour la nation juive*. This is Pinto's answer to Voltaire's essay *Des Juifs*, included in *Mélanges de littérature, d'histoire et de philosophie* (1756).

³² *La difesa de' libri santi*, 10–11.

³³ *La difesa de' libri santi*, 11.

³⁴ *La difesa de' libri santi*, 14–15.

³⁵ *La difesa de' libri santi*, 23–25.

³⁶ On Voltaire's toleration of the Jews see: SUTCLIFFE, 'Myth, Origins, Identity.'

³⁷ *La difesa de' libri santi*, 30–31.

³⁸ *La difesa de' libri santi*, 32–84.

³⁹ *La difesa de' libri santi*, 38–41.

⁴⁰ *La difesa de' libri santi*, 99–101.

l'histoire. The respectful and almost laudatory tone used in reference to Voltaire, which can be discerned occasionally in the first two sections, in this part gives way to veiled insults. Voltaire is reprimanded for ridiculing Jewish ceremonial laws and being one of those simple men who, 'non avendo mai posto piede fuor dal loro Paese prendono per bizzarrie tutte le usanze forastiere' (having never set foot outside their country consider all foreign customs to be oddities).⁴¹ Most of the defence is directed toward Voltaire's accusations regarding Moses's alleged tolerance of other cults and the idolatry of ancient Jews. These accusations are rejected on the grounds that Voltaire did not understand the true meaning of the biblical accounts.⁴² These three main sections, made up of letters, are followed by a last one which was added at the end of the third part and also addressed issues concerning the supposed anthropophagy of the Jewish people and the possibility of making sacrifices with human blood.⁴³ Voltaire's claims, which are refuted here, mainly derive from the *Dictionnaire philosophique* and the *Traité sur la tolérance*; some excerpts are quoted directly in the text, such as the lines from the entry *Anthropophagi* drawn from the *Dictionnaire philosophique* and its counter-response. This clarifies the actual meaning of the biblical passages that Voltaire maliciously misunderstood by considering treatments of the threat of cannibalism to be evidence of the crime itself.⁴⁴

Ultimately, the book defends the Holy Scriptures against Voltaire's attacks and misinterpretations and is simultaneously a defence of the Jews and their religion more generally.

The Censorship Notes: Extracts from the Reports of the Holy Office

The opinions expressed by those the Holy Office had invited to judge *La difesa de' libri santi* reveal a number of interesting aspects of the censors' attitude towards the themes addressed in the book. We can try to understand this attitude by reading and analysing the *censure*, that is, the censorship notes, or reports, submitted to the Holy Office. I understand the Italian term *censura* (pl. *censure*), usually translated in English with the term 'censorship,' as a specific examination of the contents of a book, and not—or at least not yet—as a complex institutional body with a generally repressive character.⁴⁵ I have developed this definition of censorship by interrogating actual censors (or revisers). In this article, I will speak of censorship notes or reports respecting the contemporary meaning of 'judgement' (as per its Latin etymological root: 'judgement,' 'examination'). Censorship is only one part of the Catholic control of books and represents only one of its instruments. One of the aims of this article is to shed light

⁴¹ *La difesa de' libri santi*, 106.

⁴² *La difesa de' libri santi*, 112–13.

⁴³ It is possible that there is a reference to the blood libel/ritual murder libel. On this topic see: HILLEL J. KIEVAL, 'The Blood Libel,' in *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism*, eds SOL GOLDBERG, SCOTT URY, and KALMAN WEISER (London: Palgrave, 2021), 53–64.

⁴⁴ *La difesa de' libri santi*, 131.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of this term, see INFELISE, *I padroni dei libri*, 20; VITTORIO FRAJESE, *Nascita dell'Indice. La censura ecclesiastica dal Rinascimento alla Controriforma*, 2nd ed. (2006; Brescia: Morcelliana, 2008), 9; HUBERT WOLF, *Storia dell'Indice. Il Vaticano e i libri proibiti*, it. transl. STEFANO BACIN (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006; Rome: Donzelli, 2006), 9–15.

on what the censors did and how they understood their tasks. As Robert Darnton has observed, the censors ‘wrote as men of letters, and their reports could be considered as a form of literature.’⁴⁶ Through a reading of the censorship notes, which are part of the history of the Catholic control of book publishing, and by unveiling the activities of censors, I aim to show how the Catholic Church tried to regulate the spread of what it considered a threat.

The book *La difesa de’ libri santi* was intercepted in 1776, six years after its publication in Venice, by Tommaso Matteucci (inquisitor in Ancona from 1766 to 1788).⁴⁷ Indeed, during an inspection, four copies of the volume were found, all addressed to a Jew in the Ancona ghetto.⁴⁸ As was standard practice, when the books arrived in the port they were first taken to customs; next, the forwarding agent sent them to the inquisitor, who proceeded with the inspection.⁴⁹ On 9 December 1776, Inquisitor Matteucci sent a copy of the seized book to the Holy Office in Rome, together with a first censorship report drafted by the *consultore* (‘consultor’) of the Holy Office, Gianfrancesco Macilenti (*fl.* eighteenth century).⁵⁰ Macilenti’s judgement is quite concise: although the book does not deserve a harsh condemnation, it is not useful.⁵¹ The Inquisition then examined the book and asked three experts for their censorship notes, or opinions, in accordance with consolidated practice: after the complaint or report was sent to the Holy Office, the Inquisition requested the opinions of two consultants, and that of a third one only if there was disagreement between the first two.⁵² In July 1778, during the *Feria coram Sanctissimo*, Antonio Agostino Giorgi (1711–1797) provided the first censorship report, but a second opinion was requested from Desiderio Nardi da Cociglia (*fl.* eighteenth century), which arrived at the beginning of 1779. In the same year, a third and last opinion was requested from Gabriele Fabrizi (1725–1800). Finally, the tribunal of the Inquisition expressed itself in the assembly *Feria V coram Sanctissimo* of 17 May 1781, in the presence of Pius VI.⁵³ The following decision was conveyed: the first part of *La difesa de’ libri santi* must be

⁴⁶ ROBERT DARNTON, *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 30–31 (30); 229–43.

⁴⁷ LUCA AL SABBAGH, DANIELE SANTARELLI, HERMAN H. SCHWEDT, and DOMIZIA WEBER, eds, *I giudizi della fede. L’Inquisizione romana e i suoi tribunali in età moderna* (Florence: Edizioni CLORI, 2017), 40; FABIO TARZIA, *Libri e rivoluzione: figure e mentalità nella Roma di fine ancien régime (1770-1800)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000), 31.

⁴⁸ Regarding the Jewish community of Ancona, see LUCA ANDREONI, *Una nazione in commercio: Ebrei di Ancona, traffici adriatici e pratiche mercantili in età moderna* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2019); MARTINA MAMPIERI e LUCA ANDREONI, ‘«Tutta l’arte de rabini». Un caso di confisca di libri ebraici ad Ancona: controllo e conflitto (1728),’ in *L’Inquisizione e gli ebrei*, ed. CAFFIERO, 49–81.

⁴⁹ DELPIANO, *Il governo della lettura*, 166.

⁵⁰ I have found no information about Macilenti. The *consultore* is a consultant to the Holy Office cardinals.

⁵¹ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 19.

⁵² This practice was introduced with the bull *Sollicita ac provida* (1753) by Pope Benedict XIV. The norm is based on the formula *donec corrigatur*, aimed at inducing writers—during the suspension of the decree of condemnation—to correct the texts. See DELPIANO, *Il governo della lettura*, 80–92; DEL COL, *L’Inquisizione in Italia*, 716.

⁵³ The *Feria IV* was held on Wednesdays and was attended only by inquisitor cardinals. The *Feria V coram Sanctissimo* was held the following day, in the presence of the pope.

forbidden; the second was to be allowed after correction; the third part was to be allowed completely. No decree was issued, and the Holy Office asked the inquisitors of various cities to keep any copies of the book that were still in circulation at their offices.⁵⁴

Through an analysis of extracts from the censorship notes, drafted by the experts that the Inquisition had commissioned, it is possible to explore the content of the various assessments of *La difesa de' libri santi*. Furthermore, it also allows us to understand how the authors structured and organised the censorship notes. Some reports were in favour of the book's circulation because it contained an attack on Voltaire's ideas, whereas others were opposed to its circulation because the book also contained a defence of the Jews and their religion. Hence, the Catholic Church was called on to face two problems that emerged and intertwined.

Antonio Agostino Giorgi

Antonio Agostino Giorgi was an Orientalist scholar and librarian. After entering the Augustinian order, Giorgi received holy orders from Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV. He taught 'Sacra Scrittura' (Sacred Scripture) at the Archiginnasio della Sapienza (from 1746 to 1762) and directed the Biblioteca Angelica in Rome (from 1752 to 1797). Beginning in 1772, he served as *consulitore* for the Holy Office.⁵⁵ Giorgi presented his censorship notes in 1778 and stated that the book was to be allowed.⁵⁶ This first censorship report is the longest one and describes the content of *La difesa de' libri santi* in detail. Giorgi declared that it is a 'libro spettante in parte ai costumi, ed in parte ai s.ti libri, e alla religione degli ebrei' (book pertaining in part to the customs, in part to the holy books, and to the religion of the Jews).⁵⁷ Giorgi wrote that, thanks to this book, the author 'è giunto a screditare e a coprire di eterno obbrobrio e d'infinita ignominia la portentosa vanità e l'empia audacia del sacrilego derisore de' Santi Libri [...] il Voltaire' (has come to discredit and cover with eternal shame and infinite ignominy the portentous vanity and impious audacity of the sacrilegious mocker of the Holy Books [...] Voltaire).⁵⁸ He mentions a number of previous opinions expressed on the book: that of the Roman periodic journal *Efemeridi letterarie*,⁵⁹ which adopted a complimentary tone in its review of the French edition, and that of the Apostolic Nuncio in Vienna, Giuseppe Garampi (1725–1792), nuncio from

⁵⁴ In the same folder we find the letters of receipt for orders from the inquisitors of Genoa, Piacenza, and Parma (dated June 1781, after the *Feria V* of May 1781). ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), ff. 6r–8v.

⁵⁵ GUIDO GREGORIO FAGIOLI VERCELLONE, 'Giorgi, Agostino Antonio,' *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 100 vols., vol. 55 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2001), accessed 3 April 2022, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/agostino-antonio-giorgi_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/agostino-antonio-giorgi_(Dizionario-Biografico)); HUBERT WOLF, ed., *Prosopographie von Römischer Inquisition und Indexkongregation 1701-1813*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010), 596–99. Giorgi was part of the group of councillors who were asked to give their opinion on the changes introduced by Benedict XIV's bull *Sollicita ac provida* (1753). MARIO ROSA, *Riformatori e ribelli nel '700 religioso italiano* (Bari: Dedalo Libri, 1969), 75–76.

⁵⁶ The *censura* by Giorgi is contained in ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), ff. 22v–35v.

⁵⁷ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 22v.

⁵⁸ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 22r.

⁵⁹ The periodical *Efemeridi letterarie di Roma* appeared between 1772 and 1798.

1776 to 1785. The latter judged the work to be useful for the faithful, in this case as well based on his reading of the French edition. Giorgi produced a sort of collation of the French edition he had at his disposal (the third Paris edition of 1772) and the 1770 Italian edition. Giorgi gave his assurance that the books contained nothing offensive to religion or morality—the conventional categories that demanded a censor’s attention. He then described the structure of the work and expressed a general judgement on the first part:

L’unico universale argomento che vi si tratti è una vivace apologia dei costumi, dell’onestà e delle morali virtù degli ebrei in genere, ma specialmente dei portoghesi e de’ spagnuoli, creduti discendenti dalle primissime famiglie della Tribù di Giuda sino dai tempi antichissimi della schiavitù Babilonica contro le accuse di Voltaire. Male per tanto si confa a questa prima parte il titolo italiano di = Difesa de Santi Libri etc i quali dall’ebreo, o forse deista, Pinto si suppongono, ma non si difendono.⁶⁰

The only universal argument that it deals with is a lively apologia of the customs, honesty, and moral virtues of the Jews in general, but especially of the Portuguese and Spaniards, who are believed to be descendants of the first families of the Tribe of Judah from the earliest times of Babylonian slavery, against the accusations of Voltaire. This first part is therefore ill-suited to the Italian title of = Difesa de Santi Libri etc which are supposed to be [defended], yet are not, by the Jew, or perhaps deist, Pinto.

Instead, the second part of *La difesa de’ libri santi* is ‘veramente difesa e difesa illustre de Santi Libri e specialmente del Pentateuco di Moise, non meno che de’ costumi degli antichi ebrei a tempo del loro legislatore ora diffamato a torto dall’empio accusatore Voltaire’ (truly a defence and an illustrious defence of the Holy Books and especially of the Pentateuch of Moses, as well as of the customs of the ancient Jews at the time of their legislator, now wrongfully slandered by the impious accuser Voltaire).⁶¹ In Giorgi’s opinion, the work was ultimately

Vantaggiosissima alla somma e unica causa della vera religione. [Esclusa] la sola prima parte [...] tutto il resto è una vittoriosa difesa della divina rivelazione, e de’ sommi libri del Vecchio Testamento contro gl’increduli: giova infinitamente a cautelare il comune de fedeli acciorché non si lascino sedurre dalla lettura degl’empij libri di Voltaire, e degl’altri filosofi del seculo sacrilegj osteggiatori delle divine scritture.⁶²

Most advantageous to the highest and only cause of true religion. [Apart from] the first part alone [...] all the rest is a victorious defence of divine revelation, and of the supreme books of the Old Testament against unbelievers: it infinitely helps to protect the faithful from being seduced by reading the impious books of Voltaire and the other philosophers of the century, sacrilegious opponents of the divine scriptures.

Giorgi concluded his censorship notes by arguing that the book does not deserve condemnation, since the defence of the Jewish religion concerns ‘la pura Mosaica e non la presente superstiziosa’ (the pure Mosaic [one] and not the superstitious

⁶⁰ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 24v.

⁶¹ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 24v.

⁶² ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 31v.

present),⁶³ and he was keen to specify that ‘la religione giudaica, che in questa opera si difende, è l’antica e quella che Mosaica puramente si appella, osservata dal medesimo nostro signore G.C. finché egli non istituì la nuova da pubblicarsi per tutto il mondo’ (the religion of Judaism, which is defended in this work, is the ancient religion and that which is purely called Mosaic, observed by our Lord J.C. himself until he established the new religion to be published throughout the world).⁶⁴

Desiderio Nardi da Cociglia

The author of the second censorship notes is Desiderio Nardi da Cociglia. He was provincial minister of the Order of Friars Minor and a *qualificatore* of the Holy Office from 1778 onwards.⁶⁵ He drafted his report on *La difesa de’ libri santi* in 1779 arguing that the book should be forbidden. Nardi divided his report into two parts: the first part described the content of the book while the second part provided his evaluation of it.⁶⁶ His opinion on whether *La difesa de’ libri santi* should be allowed to circulate is clear from the outset. The report contains numerous comments that condemn inadmissible ideas:

Questo è un libro che forma un panegirico, ed un continuo encomio della nazione giudaica [...]. Cresce però grandemente il sospetto, che con i fini maliziosi si vogliano le copie di questo libro disseminare. Ho detto della nazione giudaica, perché infatti così è e quivi parimente si ravvisa non so che di doloso e fraudolento: perché laddove il titolo del libro porta *Difesa de Libri santi e della religione giudaica*, che si potrebbe intendere dell’antica anteriore alla venuta del NS Redentore; nella prima parte poi del libro si difende l’odierno popolo ebraico, e il di lui costume.⁶⁷

This book is a panegyric and continuous praise of the Jewish nation [...]. There is, however, a growing suspicion that copies of this book are being disseminated for malicious purposes. I have said the Jewish nation, for this is indeed the case, and there is also something wilful and fraudulent about it: even though the title of the book is *Difesa de Libri santi e della religione giudaica*, which could be taken to mean the ancient one prior to the arrival of our Redeemer, the first part of the book defends the present Jewish people and their customs.

Nardi’s censorship notes state three main reasons why the book should be proscribed. The first concerns the futility of allowing another book against Voltaire:

Il signor di Voltaire colla sua [...] fantasia può inventare favole e frottole per la scena ed il teatro, in cui come poeta vi fa qualche figura: ma quando tratta le materie Teologiche, ed in particolare le appartenenti ai Santi Libri è un mero copista, ed un ripetente di ciò che anno scritto gl’increduli il passato secolo Spinoso, Hobbes, Bayle. Ora siccome i sofismi di questi disgraziati scrittori sono stati confutati colla maggior

⁶³ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 34v.

⁶⁴ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 34v.

⁶⁵ Some biographical information can be found in his own work: DESIDERIO NARDI DA COCIGLIA, *Nuovo compendio storico della vite de’ romani pontefici* (Rome: Giovanni Desideri, 1787). WOLF, ed., *Prosopographie*, vol. 2, cxxi. The position of *qualificatore* was entrusted to experienced theologians.

⁶⁶ The *censura* by Nardi is contained in ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), ff. 40v–55r.

⁶⁷ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 44r.

robustezza, e dottrina da uomini eccellenti della nostra Cattolica Chiesa non veggo perché si debba far tanto conto di quattro male accozzate ciarle del Voltaire puro copista e perché si abbia ad aspettare per confutarle l'aiuto d'Ebrei, o veri o mascherati, che nell'antidoto miscelano un pessimo veleno.⁶⁸

Monsieur Voltaire, with his [...] imagination, can invent fables and fairy tales for the stage and for the theatre, in which as a poet he makes some impression: but when he tackles theological subjects, and in particular those belonging to the Sacred Books, he is a mere copyist and repeater of what the unbelievers—Spinoza, Hobbes, Bayle—have written in the past century. Now, since excellent men of our Catholic Church have refuted the sophistries of these wretched writers with the utmost robustness and doctrine, I do not see why we have to rely so much on the four ill-conceived jibes of Voltaire, a pure copyist, and why we have to wait for the help of Jews, either real or disguised, to refute them, who mix the antidote with a very bad poison.

The second reason concerns the presence of a defence of the Jewish people:

Permettere libero corso ad un libro in cui si encomia e giustifica la morale degl'odierni ebrei se non di tutti, almeno degli spagnoli, e portoghesi [...] come discendenti /per sogno/ della tribù di Giuda [...] sarebbe un dare ansa ai medesimi di insolentire e col permesso di difendere il presente loro costume, e l'antica loro religione [...] con danno e grave scandalo dalla Chiesa Cristiana.⁶⁹

To allow free circulation to a book that praises and justifies the morals of today's Jews, if not all [of them], then at least of the Spaniards and the Portuguese [...] descendants /in a dream/ of the tribe of Judas [...] would mean giving them the pretext of insolence and permission to defend their present customs and ancient religion [...] to the detriment and grave scandal of the Christian Church.

Thirdly, Nardi argued that the book should be banned because it contains a criticism of the Vulgate:

In molti passi dell'opera si critica e censura la nostra Sagra Scrittura Volgata come difettosa e si pretende che i difetti di questa debbano essere emendati e corretti secondo il testo originale ebraico. Si averà dunque da permettere che un libro sì antico sì venerabile come la nostra Volgata [...] sia vilipeso e deriso da quattro circoncisi.⁷⁰

In many passages of the work, our Sacred Scripture Vulgate is criticised and censured for being defective and it is claimed that its defects must be amended and corrected according to the original Hebrew text. It will thus be allowed that a book as ancient and venerable as our Vulgate [...] be vilified and mocked by four circumcised [men].

As these extracts demonstrate, Nardi's conclusion is sharp: '[II] mio sentimento è che il libro sia proscritto, come quello che contiene proposizioni false, erronee, seducenti, offensive' (My opinion is that the book should be proscribed because it contains false, erroneous, seductive, and offensive propositions).⁷¹

⁶⁸ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), ff. 45r–46v.

⁶⁹ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 46r.

⁷⁰ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 46r.

⁷¹ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 55v.

Gabriele Fabrizi

The third *censura* was written by Gabriele Fabrizi, a theologian of the Biblioteca Casanatense and author of a book on the same topic as *La difesa de' libri santi* to which he attached letters by certain Portuguese Jews.⁷² Fabrizi's censorship notes were composed as a response to Nardi's negative evaluation and presented a few months later, although still in the same year (1779).⁷³ The text is composed of four parts, called *osservazioni* (observations). Fabrizi argued that the book was suitable for the current times:

[Il libro] meriterebbe una giusta riprensione. Ma considerando il luogo, le circostanze, ed il tempo in cui fu pubblicata la presente traduzione, e ciò che deve maggiormente premere, trattandosi qui di un libro appartenente ai fonti primigeni della Religione in esso egregiamente difesi contro l'empie dicerie d'un libertino scrittore qual era il defunto Voltaire, mi pare (salvo un migliore giudizio) che l'editore o traduttore italiano sia degno in ciò di qualche scusa.⁷⁴

[The book] deserves a fair reprehension. But considering the place, circumstances, and time in which the present translation was published, and what is even more pressing, since we are dealing here with a book belonging to the primordial sources of Religion and which excellently defends them against the blasphemous rumours of a libertine writer such as the late Voltaire, it seems to me (subject to better judgment) that the Italian publisher or translator is worthy of being excused.

In Fabrizi's opinion, the book could be useful for countering the ideas that were circulating against

Chiunque ama sinceramente la Santa Religione, e conosce a qual grado pervenuta sia la miscredenza oggidì sparsa in quei Regni fioritissimi dove la Fede trionfava più che mai, non può ch'essere sensibilmente afflitto di tante stragi da essa sofferte; non può allo stesso tempo rendere abbastanza grazie alla divina bontà per tanti buoni libri, i quali vengono scritti da valenti uomini in difesa della Religione con maggiore furore oltraggiata. Il secolo nostro deve in buona parte questa sventurata rivoluzione alle opere libertine, ed empie del Voltaire. Le armi adoperate da codesto distruggitore d'ogn'idea di Religione dirette le vedo quasi sempre contro i monumenti primigenii della Rivelazione.⁷⁵

Whoever sincerely loves the Holy Religion, and knows the degree that unbelief has reached, today widespread in those flourishing kingdoms where Faith has triumphed more than ever, cannot but be sensibly afflicted by the many slaughters suffered by it; he cannot, at the same time, convey sufficient thanks to the divine goodness for so

⁷² GABRIELE FABRIZI, *Des titres primitifs de la révélation* (Rome: Pierre Durand, Jean Genereux Salomoni, Venance Monaldini; Paris: Louis Cellot, Veuve Desaint, Louis Cellot; Londres: Pierre Molini, 1772). For further information on Fabrizi, who was possibly a convert from Judaism, see MAURO PERANI, 'Due cippi funerari della metà del Cinquecento dal cimitero ebraico di Ravenna,' in *Il cimitero ebraico di Lugo*, ed. MAURO PERANI, ANTONIO PIRAZZINI, and GIACOMO CORAZZOL (Florence: Giuntina, 2011), 145–60, especially 147–48.

⁷³ The *censura* of Fabrizi is contained in ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), ff. 68v–99r.

⁷⁴ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 68r.

⁷⁵ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), f. 70r.

many good books, which are written by worthy men in defence of a Religion that is ever more furiously offended. Our century owes much of this unfortunate revolution to the libertine and impious works of Voltaire. The weapons used by this destroyer of every idea of Religion are almost always directed against the primitive monuments of Revelation.

Fabrizi's main concern was to allow the circulation of a book that could serve as an effective countermeasure against the new ideas spreading at the time:

Il libro dell'abbate guenee ha procurato e procura [...] grandissimo bene. Questo solo che è degno di somma [...] venerazione, è il maggiore elogio che potrei fare della *Difesa dei Libri Sacri*, e compensa abbondantemente i piccioli nei, che in esso potrebbero osservarsi.⁷⁶

The book of Abbot guenee has procured and procures [...] great benefit. This alone, which is worthy of the utmost [...] veneration, is the highest praise I could give to the *Difesa dei Libri Sacri*, and abundantly compensates for the small moles [imperfections] that can be observed in it.

Fabrizi agreed with Giorgi that a book against Voltaire could still serve to dismantle his criticism of the Scripture. However, Nardi did not recognise the book's utility. It seems that the argumentative force of these letters compensates for the defects—the stance in favour of contemporary Jews, above all—characterising *La Difesa*.

The Church and the Lesser Evil: Conflicts and Divisions

During the eighteenth century, the Catholic Church was concerned with shifting from repressive to persuasive techniques, for example by promoting refutations of books listed in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* and translating anti-*philosophique* works.⁷⁷ As we have seen, *La difesa de' libri santi* represents the latter case, as it is the translation of a work arguing against Voltaire's doctrines. Nevertheless, the book attracted the attention of the Inquisition.

This episode offers a good example of the dynamics between two important issues involving the Catholic Church during the eighteenth century. The affair surrounding the condemnation or acquittal of *La difesa de' libri santi* reveals two intertwining issues: the Catholic Church's attitude towards those considered 'increduli' (unbelievers), 'sacrileji osteggiatori delle divine scritture' (sacrilegious opponents of the divine scriptures), and 'scrittori libertini' (libertine writers)—hence a recent, unprecedented problem—and towards the Jews, which instead represented an ancient problem. The Church had to decide whether it was advantageous to allow the circulation of a book that contained a defence of the Jewish religion and Holy Scripture, but which could—at the same time—provide a useful weapon for countering Voltaire's ideas, although it was said to have been written by Jews. In other words, it had to choose the lesser evil. This case is particularly intriguing because it

⁷⁶ ACDF, SO, CL 1779–1780 (1), ff. 96v–r.

⁷⁷ DELPIANO, *Il governo della lettura*.

enables us to contemplate how censorship priorities shifted amidst intellectual renewal during the Age of Enlightenment.

The matter is complex and the comments included in the censorship notes are conflicting. It appears that the choice fell mainly on proscribing the part that contained the alleged defence of the Jewish religion, especially since this section of the book seems to have been accused of advocating a coeval Jewish religion—that of Sephardic Jews in particular. In fact, as we have seen, only the ancient Jewish religion is somehow respected, albeit specifically in view of its relationship with Jesus. What is noteworthy is not only the choice of the lesser evil, as made explicit by the move to proscribe the first part, correct the second part and accept the third part, but also the existence of competing perceptions. This demonstrates that it was possible for one censor to behave according to the rules of a game that were different from or incompatible with those followed by someone else operating in the same system. I have tried to reconstruct the censorship process by analysing three separate voices within the same Inquisitional system, which may help us to assess the ecclesiastical ability to grasp the cultural challenges surfacing in the eighteenth century. The main problem with the new Enlightenment ideas, from the Church's perspective, was that they challenged the very idea and validity of religion. Hence, it was no longer a question of adopting strategies to encourage the conversion of Jews and—more in general—fighting against the Jewish religion and its doctrine; what was at stake was the very idea of religion, and this cornerstone had to be safeguarded from that which was perceived as a threat.⁷⁸

The episode presented here sheds light on the Catholic Church's responses, expressed through the Inquisition's measures, to new ideas—often coming from the other side of the Alps—and *philosophique* works. In this case, the responses to this new challenge were not unanimous. The complexity of the affair is evident, as are the internal splits and contrasting visions arising from this encounter with Enlightenment ideas. I have tried to capture the tone of what took place 'behind the curtains' of an authoritarian and hierarchical cultural system and the values that guided the Catholic Church's actions. Analysing the censorship notes prepared for the examination and trial of books that had attracted the Holy Office's attention appears to be a very interesting task.⁷⁹ This study allows us to learn more about the work of the censors: their points of view, the way they performed their tasks, and their specific responses to debated issues. Censors read to prevent Catholics from reading dangerous books, and their opinions were an essential part of the Church's highly structured apparatus set up to control and discipline culture. In other words, censorship notes are internal material of the Congregation, an entity for which we often see only the outcomes, as in the case of the official banning of books.

⁷⁸ Nevertheless, some religious characteristics can be traced in the Enlightenment. See DAVID SORKIN, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷⁹ Darnton, for example, also took censorship reports into consideration for his important study on censorship in Bourbon France, British India, and East Germany. DARNTON, *Censors at Work*.