

***Making Italy Anglican.***  
***Why the Book of Common Prayer Was Translated into Italian***

Stefano Villani  
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In 1685, the same year as the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the printer Moses Pitt published in London the first Italian edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*, under the title *Il libro delle preghiere pubbliche ed amministrazione de' sacramenti ed altri riti e cerimonie della chiesa, secondo l'uso della Chiesa Anglicana; insieme col Saltero over i salmi di David, come hanno da esser recitati nelle chiese. E la forma e modo di fare, ordinare e consacrare vescovi, presbiteri e diaconi*.

The translation followed decades of attempts driven, on the one hand, by the desire of certain Italian Protestants to rekindle the flame of religious dissent within the Peninsula, and, on the other, by the interest of English ecclesiastics in promoting an alternative to Catholicism on the European continent.

Within the framework of diplomatic relations with Venice, James I's ambassador Henry Wotton, in 1603, launched an attempt to establish a clandestine Protestant community in the lagoon city, involving in the project the Servite friars Fulgenzio Micanzio and Paolo Sarpi, as well as the Lucchese exile in Geneva, Giovanni Diodati. Their intention was to craft a liturgy distinct from the Catholic rite, employing only selected portions of the Roman Missal. The difficulties they encountered—at a critical moment in relations between Venice and Rome, culminating in the papal Interdict of 1606—left the project unfinished, though it was later resumed by the new ambassador, William Bedell. Bedell intended to create in the city a national Church of Anglican character, for which he produced an Italian translation of the Anglican liturgy, unfortunately now lost. This was only one among the many failed or abortive attempts ('This is a story of failure'; 1) to 'Anglicanise' the religion of Italians through the translation of the *Book of Common Prayer*.—attempts whose expectations, dynamics, and challenges Stefano Villani's book reconstructs with effectiveness and a wealth of documentation, setting them in relation to the shifting aims pursued by the Church of England in its various confrontations with the Church of Rome. The story of each edition is elucidated in detail, distinguishing between genuinely new editions and, more often, corrected and updated versions based on earlier texts. More importantly, thanks to this documentary excavation, the biographical trajectories of minor figures—little known yet often situated at the centre of extensive international networks—also come to light. Regardless of the varying conditions and possibilities for implementing a

project of ‘Anglicanising’ the religion of Italians, it may seem surprising that efforts were directed not toward biblical translation—which would have been associated with a form of grassroots education—but rather toward presenting Italian religious and political elites with a liturgical form that embodied the essence of the Church of England and was believed to be closer to the apostolic model. The Church of England held that disseminating an Italian translation of the *Book of Common Prayer* could trigger a significant transformation in the Italian political and religious landscape, positioning itself as an exemplary model to be emulated either in separating from the Church of Rome or in reforming it from within. This perspective helps to explain why the aspiration to promote reform ‘from above’ suggests that this episode is best interpreted primarily through the dynamics of political history—that is, within the sphere of relations between Church and State, and between England and Italy.

The editorial history of the *Book of Common Prayer* was therefore entirely different from the support given to the dissemination and distribution of the Holy Scriptures and of religious propaganda texts in which the Protestant countries of Europe had repeatedly engaged with regard to Italy. The possibility of supporting the translation of the Bible into the Italian vernacular, together with the first translation of the *Book of Common Prayer*, saw an initial joint attempt during Henry Wotton’s ambassadorship in Venice. Indeed, both the first Italian translation of the liturgy of the Church of England in the lagoon city and a new edition of Giovanni Diodati’s translation of the New Testament (printed in Geneva and repeatedly used as a literary and linguistic model for the translation of the Anglican liturgy) date to 1608. Diodati’s involvement in the British projects for Venice, his brief stay in the city, and his connections with Wotton and Sarpi constituted a ‘last-ditch’ attempt to propagate Protestantism through what was still considered a potential point of entry for Reformed ideas into the Italian peninsula. The British ambassador’s support for Diodati’s project to provide a biblical text alternative to the one approved by the Church of Rome—and banned to the laity for nearly half a century by the Council of Trent—indeed led to the choice of a pocket-sized edition (*in-dodicesimo*), so that it could be distributed and read by the widest possible audience.

The 1685 edition—the first complete Italian edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*—promoted by Edward Brown, former chaplain of the Levant Company, was profoundly shaped by Sarpi’s legacy. The translation, carried out by Giovan Battista Cappello, the son of a man exiled to London on religious grounds, functioned as an instrument of political propaganda intended to demonstrate the decorum and dignity of the Church of England, and presented as a gift to the new (Catholic) sovereigns James II and Mary of Modena. Yet Brown’s edition was above all an attempt to reconstitute an Italian Protestant church in London—an important, though fluctuating, centre of theological debate which, after its suppression under Mary I, had been refounded during the reign of Elizabeth I, only to dissolve again in the mid-seventeenth century. The Anglo-Venetian context of the early seventeenth century that led to William Bedell’s translation is reconstructed by Villani in the first section of the

book. Although no copies of the original text have survived, it likely left a substantial trace in the manuscript prepared by Alessandro Amidei—a Tuscan Jew converted to Christianity—for his edition produced in the late 1660s.

During the eighteenth century, the Italian translation of the *Book of Common Prayer* became, in fact, a kind of language manual. Frequently presented as a useful tool for linguistic learning, it was reprinted in 1733, 1796, and several times after 1820. The thorough knowledge of the text expected of every English person of good family made it an excellent resource for practicing and learning Italian. At the same time, however, it constituted a written declaration of the piety of the Church of England, functioning as a potent instrument of anti-Catholic polemic that any young English visitor to Italy was deemed well advised to possess. At the height of the Grand Tour, it served as a warning against the corrupting influence of peninsular Catholicism and the moral customs it was thought to represent.

In 1831, the publication of the eighteenth-century revision of the text was promoted by George Frederick Nott and printed by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in Livorno—a port city, home to multiple confessions, and the only permanent presence of the Church of England on the peninsula. The intended recipients of the new edition (reprinted three more times within a few years) were Italian intellectuals and clergy, with the aim of encouraging internal debate within Catholicism. Later, in another outpost of the Church of England in the Mediterranean, Malta, a new edition of the text was issued. These initiatives formed part of a broader strategy to manifest British superiority within a framework of colonial ambitions, in which the United Kingdom's military and cultural expansion was complemented by the creation of numerous missionary societies of the national church, as well as other nonconformist and interdenominational organisations. The English religious and political elite felt invested with a religious civilising mission that was closely connected to the country's imperial ambitions. Within this horizon, Anglicanism developed as a proposal midway 'between Catholicism and Protestantism while emphasizing its close links to the primitive theological tradition and early patristics' (7). Shortly before the mid-nineteenth century, the translation and printing of the *Book of Common Prayer* once again involved not the Italian Protestant church in London, but a small group of politically exiled individuals with Protestant sympathies, who also founded an Italian Evangelical Union, the periodical *L'Eco di Savonarola*, and organised Bible-reading meetings.

On Italian soil, a further and more bitter failure was the attempt to persuade the leadership of the Waldensian Church to adopt the *Book of Common Prayer* and to orient this small Protestant church toward an episcopal structure and Anglican liturgy. For centuries, the Waldensians had been idealised by the British as custodians or living remnants of authentic primitive Christianity, and as such were supported through diplomatic, economic, and military means during repeated persecutions by the Duke of Savoy and the King of France.

The second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth marked a period in which the doors were opened to the arrival of Bibles, New Testaments, and popular edifying publications in support of missionary work. This development characterised other ecclesiastical denominations—primarily Methodist and Baptist—alongside the Anglican Church, from which they differed, including in their choice of texts to disseminate. Increasing literacy during this period also allowed these texts to reach a broader segment of the population.

Ultimately, Villani's book, through the magnifying lens of the Italian editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*, illuminates two fronts in a story that no longer concerns only the history of a book. On the one hand, it sheds light on the relations between England and Protestantism in the Peninsula, revealing both the support for its aspirations and the difficulties encountered, as well as the rise and fall of churches and groups, including exiles for religious or political reasons and Italian emigrants in London and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, it illuminates the strategies of the Church of England and its often- limited understanding of Italian religious and political culture. This attitude was frequently due to the 'English lack of understanding of the extent to which Catholic culture had shaped the Italian identity and relations between church and state since the Counter-Reformation' (166). It was therefore often an idealistic and somewhat unrealistic struggle to promote a form of *ecclesiae* through its liturgy, along a path continually disrupted by internal upheavals and stormy relations with the Church of Rome, which had assumed the role of a civilising power not only in Europe but throughout the world.