

# ‘Having drunk heresy with their (mother’s) milk’: English Protestant converts to Catholicism in Malta, 1600-1798

Frans Ciappara\*

*International Institute of Baroque Studies, Faculty for the Built Environment,  
University of Malta, Msida MSD 2080, Malta.  
Email: francis.ciappara@um.edu.mt*

This article analyses the conversion of 379 English Protestants to Catholicism in Malta between 1600 and 1798. It explores the motivations behind their recantation, the agents of their conversion and the role of dissimulation in discarding their Protestant faith. It ends with two remarks. First, people in the Mediterranean ‘knew no religious frontiers’.<sup>1</sup> Malta, like other Mediterranean territories was a place with a mixed religious profile. Second, though English Protestants considered themselves to be the ‘elect’ and their country the new Israel, the two faiths were not mutually exclusive and could find common ground over the defence of Christendom.

Keywords: Protestants, inquisition, religious orders, conversion, dissimulation, Christendom

In August 1732, Don Giuseppe Guicciardo, parish priest of St Paul’s Valetta, wrote to Inquisitor Mgr Giovanni Francesco Stoppani. He reported: ‘Yesterday, towards 4.00 pm, the chief judge sent one of his night captains to call me to the law courts. When I arrived I found five English heretics who wanted to embrace the Catholic religion. They were brought before me and I interrogated them through an interpreter’.<sup>2</sup> This was only one of several hundred cases where English Protestants came into close contact with the efforts of individuals and systems in Malta who were engaged in conversion. The hope was that British Protestants would be won for the Catholic Church. These activities took place at a period when British identity and global

\* I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers at *British Catholic History*, to Prof. Alexandra Walsham, Prof. Linda Colley, Prof. Tony Claydon, Dr Colin Haydon and the editor for their kind suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople. Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Don Giuseppe Guicciardo, parish priest of St Paul’s Valetta, to Inquisitor Mgr Giovanni Francesco Stoppani, 1 August 1732. Archives of the Inquisition Malta, Proceedings (hereafter AIM, Proc.) 113B, ff. 478r-9v.

power were founded on Protestantism. Linda Colley argues that Protestantism ‘provided the majority of Britons with a framework for their lives’.<sup>3</sup> Tony Claydon concurs and asserts in an equally influential work that by the late eighteenth century Britain ‘had built the military machine which would see her triumph as a defence against those who threatened reformed Christians across the continent’.<sup>4</sup> Colin Haydon’s work has also revealed the strength of anti-Catholicism within Britain, demonstrated by the declaration of a soldier who took part in the Gordon riots of 1780 that he loved ‘my king and country, but a Roman Catholic I hate’.<sup>5</sup> This article looks at a different aspect of this Protestant identity by focusing on the narratives presented by British Protestants to the inquisitors in Malta between 1600 and 1798. It examines the reasons why Protestants recanted by placing their narratives in their social and historical context, emphasising in the process Britain’s defence of European Christianity against the ungodly. It will argue that, whilst some were stories of genuine conversion, others were marked by dissimulation.

### *The Protestant presence in the archive*

To begin with, who were these Protestants who modified their birth identity by becoming Catholics and how many were they? There were 379 cases of British Protestants that came before the inquisition (Table 1). The tribunal, a branch of the Roman Inquisition, had been set up in 1561 when a group of crypto-Protestants, the ‘confraternity of good Christians’, was discovered at Mdina and Birgu. It continued to function till 1798, just a little prior to the arrival of Napoleon. By this time the court’s activities encompassed a remarkable variety of offences besides Protestantism: witchcraft, blasphemy, apostasy, forbidden literature, polygamy, eating of meat on forbidden days, solicitation in confession and freemasonry.<sup>6</sup>

The English Protestants who appeared before the inquisitors were described and categorised according to a number of groups. Those who can be identified included ‘Presbyterians’ (14) and ‘Anglicans’ and ‘Calvinists’ (17 each). Most, however, are simply called

<sup>3</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Claydon, *Europe and the Making of England 1660-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 219; Tony Claydon, *William III and the Godly Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Haydon, “‘I love my King and my Country, but a Roman Catholic I hate’: anti-catholicism, xenophobia and national identity in eighteenth-century England”, in Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, eds. *Protestantism and National Identity. Britain and Ireland, c. 1650-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33-52.

<sup>6</sup> Frans Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition in Early Modern Malta* (Malta: PEG, 2001) and ‘The Roman Inquisition Revisited: The Maltese Tribunal in the Eighteenth Century’, *The Catholic Historical Review* (hereafter *CHR*) 103, no. 3 (2017): 437-64.

Table 1 English Protestants before the Inquisition in Malta, 1600-1798 (*Source: AIM, Proc. 18-137, 139, 162*).

	Protestants	Lutherans	Anglicans	Calvinists	Presbyterians	Anabaptists	Quakers	Others (Independent, Hussite, Brownist, 'Johannite')	Unknown	Total
<b>1600-1625</b>	115	3	–	4	–	–	–	–	17	139
<b>1626-1650</b>	56	14	–	–	1	–	–	1	2	74
<b>1651-1675</b>	4	6	1	6	–	2	2	1	–	22
<b>1676-1700</b>	4	4	2	3	–	–	1	–	–	14
<b>1701-1725</b>	20	14	6	1	5	1	1	1	2	51
<b>1726-1750</b>	21	1	7	2	6	–	–	–	1	38
<b>1751-1775</b>	23	–	1	–	2	–	–	1	–	27
<b>1776-1798</b>	13	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	14
<b>Total</b>	256	42	17	17	14	3	4	4	22	379

'Protestants' (256) or 'Lutherans' (42). The latter description may be more of a reflection on the inquisitors' mind-set or their lack of close understanding of the forms of Protestantism established in England: contemporaries in England would not have used this term to describe others. |Over two centuries, their number amounted to less than two each year, but they were not evenly spaced across the period. There was a big cluster, for instance, between 1600 and 1625, signifying that Protestantism was still a threat to the Catholic Church. However, this heavy concentration on Protestants slowly began to slacken so that by the second half of the eighteenth century, blasphemy and illicit magic had replaced 'heresy' as the inquisition's chief concern.<sup>7</sup> Another observation must be made. The number of new Catholics counted in Malta is very small in comparison to the growth of the Catholic community in England, which John Bossy estimated at thirty per cent in the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Their social composition though was similar. In England they belonged to the 'inferior and middling sort of people';<sup>9</sup> in Malta they were almost all seamen, sailors and soldiers on board ships.<sup>10</sup>

These non-elite, labouring men present in Malta hailed from London as well as from seaports like Portsmouth, Plymouth, Dover and Bristol, Sunderland, Hull, King's Lynn and Liverpool. Their story attests to the high levels of mobility amongst some parts of the early modern population of Europe<sup>11</sup> and the protean character of identity in the Mediterranean world. William Howell, an essentially rootless 25-year-old sailor from London, provides us with a good picture of a diversified world in constant flux and movement. He first joined an English vessel at Livorno with which he sailed to Naples, and then to Trapani and Venice, carrying a ship-load of salt. Here he embarked on a ship of the Order of St John, the 'San Raimondo', to Malta, where he enrolled as a corsair with

<sup>7</sup> E. William Monter and John Tedeschi, 'Toward a Statistical Profile of the Italian Inquisitions, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries', in Gustav Henningsen and John Tedeschi, eds. *The Inquisition in Early Modern Europe. Studies on Sources and Methods* (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 134.

<sup>8</sup> John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570-1850* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), ch. 8. See also Colm Lennon, 'The Rise of Recusancy among the Dublin Patricians, 1580-1613', in W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood, eds. *The Churches, Ireland and the Irish*, Studies in Church History 25 (1989), 123-32.

<sup>9</sup> Eamon Duffy, "'Over the Wall": Converts from Popery in Eighteenth-Century England', *The Downside Review* 94 (1976): 1-25.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Brogini, *Malte, Frontière de Chrétienté (1530-1670)* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2006), 428. The same can be observed for Spain. See Bartolomé Bennassar, 'Un Dialogue Difficile: Les Inquisiteurs et les Marins Protestants de l'Europe du Nord', in Bartolomé Bennassar, *La Vie, la Mort, la Foi* (Paris: PUF, 1993), 168.

<sup>11</sup> For a general picture, see Simonetta Cavaciocchi, ed. *Le migrazioni in Europa secc. XVII-XVIII* (Florence: Mondadori, 1994) and Laurence Fontaine, 'Gli studi sulla mobilità in Europa nell'età moderna: Problemi e Prospettive di Ricerca', *Quaderni Storici* 93 (1996): 739-56.

Captain Pasticcio and, after eight months with another corsair, Captain Francesco; he arrived in Malta in 1723.<sup>12</sup>

### *Circumstances of conversion*

Having identified these Britons, the next task is to investigate the circumstances of their conversion. It has already been said that with time the preoccupation with Protestants, which had characterized the Roman inquisition in earlier periods, abated considerably.<sup>13</sup> The two ‘Lutherans’, therefore, who assumed in 1617 that they would be burnt on landing in Malta, were grossly mistaken.<sup>14</sup> As in Italy,<sup>15</sup> by the seventeenth century, they could live free of fear. They could also be decently buried in the Protestant cemetery at the Lazaretto,<sup>16</sup> in contrast to their counterparts at Livorno, who until 1746 were interred in an open field, for their corpses to be eaten up by dogs.<sup>17</sup>

In Malta, some of the mechanisms of detection seen in Spanish inquisition were absent. For example, there were no *comisarios*, the part-time lay officials, who visited ships that entered the harbour to find out whether Protestant services had been held on board; nor were Protestants forced to attend mass.<sup>18</sup> The Alba-Cobham agreement of 1604 between Britain and Spain (Malta’s feudal lord) breached the system of confessional intolerance and ensured that Protestants could be molested only if they gave any scandal.<sup>19</sup> Scandal encompassed a number of activities: performing ‘impious rites’ and ‘Calvinistic suppers’, ridiculing priests and the pope’s

<sup>12</sup> AIM, Proc. 108A, ff. 315r-20v.

<sup>13</sup> Compare Tables 2.3 and 4.2 in Ciappara, *Society and The Inquisition*, 91, 185.

<sup>14</sup> AIM, Proc. 38A, ff. 161r-4v.

<sup>15</sup> In 1622 the inquisitor of Pisa described the English and Flemish heretics as ‘untouchables’. The inquisitor at Milan in 1628 regretted that the ‘Lutherans’ circulated freely as merchants and tourists. In 1634 the nuncio at Venice described the great confusion the heretics caused in the city. See Michaela Valente, ‘Un sondaggio sulla prassi cattolica del nicodemismo : ‘Che li scolari tedeschi si debbano tollerare a vivere luteranamente, in secreto però’, in Susanna Peyronel, ed. *Cinquant’anni di storiografia italiana sulla Riforma e i movimenti ereticali in Italia 1900-2000* (Turin: Claudiana editrice, 2002), 175-216.

<sup>16</sup> National Library Malta, Archives (of the Order of St John) 6529, f. 206v.

<sup>17</sup> Lucia Frattarelli Fisher and Stefano Villani, ‘“People of every mixture”: Immigration, Tolerance and Religious Conflicts in Early Modern Livorno’, in Katherine Isaacs, ed. *Immigration and Emigration in Historical Perspective* (Pisa: Edizione Plus, 2007), 15; Matteo Giunti and Stefano Villani, ‘L’Antico Cimitero degli Inglesi di Livorno: Dalle Origini al 1900’, *Nuovi Studi Livornesi* 11 (2004): 35-51.

<sup>18</sup> Pauline Croft, ‘Englishmen and the Spanish Inquisition’, *The English Historical Review* (henceforth *EHR*) 87 (1972): 249-68. For the duty of Jews to attend sermons in Spain, see Emanuele Colombo, *Convertire I musulmani. L’esperienza di un gesuita spagnolo del Seicento* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2007), 65.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition. An Historical Revision* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 279.

authority, distributing pernicious literature, and scoffing and laughing at the ceremonies used in the celebration of the sacraments.<sup>20</sup>

Protestants visited Malta generally for reasons of trade and on condition they did not mix with the local population.<sup>21</sup> They were to stay in 'some remote and segregated place' until their departure, for instance at Vittoriosa, the seat of the Holy Office, lest they 'disseminate great errors in this island and impress several heresies upon the hearts of the ignorant'.<sup>22</sup> They also needed the approval of the cardinal inquisitors, who issued them with permits, generally lasting from one month<sup>23</sup> to one year.<sup>24</sup> Even the English corsair, Captain Edward, and his men, whose forays against the 'Turks' were of inestimable service to Christendom, were issued with a permit valid for only eight months in 1608.<sup>25</sup> Thus, when in 1735 the English merchants residing at Messina asked to come to Malta with their families in case the Anglo-Spanish war broke out, they were refused on the grounds that their stay would be for an indefinite period of time. Grandmaster Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736) may have liked to oblige but on this occasion his wish was thwarted.<sup>26</sup>

Yet in other cases, reasons of state could overcome religious scruple. One such occasion arose at the time of the war of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714). Clement XI (1700-1721) supported Spain and commanded Mgr Giorgio Spinola (1703-1706) to punish those English Protestants who, on arriving in Malta with their ships, refused to embrace the Catholic faith. However, as there was the fear that Britain, which was seeking a naval base in the Mediterranean, would attack Malta,<sup>27</sup> His Holiness rescinded this order the next year.<sup>28</sup> Enforcing a strict policy of conversion could have had potential political ramifications.<sup>29</sup> Rome considered the consequences of its actions,

<sup>20</sup> For the excuses offered by Admiral Narborough for the several disreputable actions perpetrated by his officers and sailors in 1675, see AIM, Correspondence (hereafter Corr.) 13, f. 123r, Card. Barberini to Mgr Pallavicino, 14 Dec. 1675. See also Anthony Zammit Gabarretta, 'The Royal Navy and Vittoriosa – Old and New Documents', *Melita Historica* 8, no. 1 (1980): 36.

<sup>21</sup> For Englishmen on the Grand Tour, see T. Freller, *Malta and the Grand Tour* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> AIM, Corr. 94, f. 143v, Card. Marescotti to Mgr Caracciolo, 26 March 1709.

<sup>23</sup> AIM, Corr. 13, f. 3r, Card. Francesco Barbarini to Mgr Pallavicino, 13 Jan. 1674.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 228r, Card. Francesco Barbarini to Mgr Giacomo Cantelmi, 29 Oct., 1678.

<sup>25</sup> AIM, Corr. 1, f. 343r, Cardinal Arigone to Mgr Carbonese, 15 Nov. 1608. The order was repeated on 24 Sept. 1610. See AIM, Corr. 2, f. 91r.

<sup>26</sup> Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede (Vatican), Stanza Storica (hereafter ACDF, St St) II 1 – c, Mgr Stoppani to Card. Ottoboni, 16 July 1735, unnumbered. See also AIM, Corr. 95, ff. 37v-8r, Mgr Stoppani to Card. Ottoboni, 24 Sept. 1735.

<sup>27</sup> S. W. C. Pack, *Sea Power in the Mediterranean* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1971), 26-34.

<sup>28</sup> AIM, Corr. 95, f. 31v, Mgr Durini to Card. Ottoboni, 16 July, 1735.

<sup>29</sup> The same had happened in 1605 when an English ship arrived in Malta loaded with several commodities so necessary for the upkeep of the island's fortifications. The inquisitor, Mgr Ettore Diotallevi, would not allow the crew to land unless they converted but he refrained from taking further action when Mendel, the Order's ambassador at Rome, warned the cardinals that this could be the occasion for English ships to attack the Order's vessels. See AIM, Corr. 88, f. 96v, Card. Masserano to Mgr Diotallevi, 2 July 1605.

sought an acceptable way out of uncomfortable situations, and warned inquisitors to proceed ‘with all caution and prudence so much needed in the present circumstances’.<sup>30</sup> This caused the inquisitor Mgr Giacomo Caracciolo (1706-1710) to lament in 1709 that heretics had never been allowed to stay freely in Malta, except in recent times.<sup>31</sup>

Caracciolo, in making these comments, perhaps had in mind the 1661 case of Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers. Both women were Quakers and had been sent back to Britain.<sup>32</sup> This case, fascinating in several respects, is also revealing because though the women were imprisoned, they were not made to abjure.<sup>33</sup> This was in accordance with one of the rules of the *Ospizio Apostolico dei Convertendi* at Rome, which warned that ‘it is a thousand times better that they (Protestants) leave as manifest heretics . . . rather than evil and false Catholics’.<sup>34</sup>

### ‘Encouraging’ conversion

There is evidence, however, to suggest that all efforts were made to ease Protestants’ entry into the Catholic Church.<sup>35</sup> Firstly, they were treated with charity: According to Eliseo Masini’s *Sacro Arsenal*, ‘the health of souls and the preservation of faith are a most noble and principal end of the sacred tribunal of the inquisition’.<sup>36</sup> After all, according to the English Jesuit Robert Persons (1546-1610), these were not true heretics, ‘for they lack sufficient knowledge of the Catholic faith, or leastwise instructions, having never

<sup>30</sup> AIM, Corr. 18, f. 172r, Card. Marescotti to Mgr Caracciolo, 31 Aug. 1709. On this point, see Stefano Villani, ‘Britain and the Papacy: Diplomacy and Conflict in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century’, in Maria Anronietta Visceglia, ed. *Papato e politica internazionale nella prima età moderna* (Rome: Viella, 2013), 301-22.

<sup>31</sup> AIM, Corr. 18, ff. 141r-2v, Mgr Caracciolo to Card. Masserano, 25 May 1709. See also AIM, Corr. 94, ff. 150r-1r, Card. Messerano to Mgr Caracciolo 6 July 1709.

<sup>32</sup> AIM, Proc. 70A, ff. 23r-38v; AIM, Corr. 11, f. 70r, Card. Francesco Barberini to Mgr Casanate, 20 Aug. 1661. For the whole episode, see T. R., *A Brief History of the Voyage of Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers to the Island of Malta where the Apostle Paul suffered shipwreck. And their cruel sufferings in the Inquisition there, for near four years; occasion’d by the malice of the Monks and Friars against them and how they came to be delivered from thence, and their safe return home to England* (London, 1975). For the missionary campaigns of the Quakers in Europe, see also Sünne Juterczenka, ‘Charting the “Progress of Truth”. Quaker Missions and the Topography of Dissent in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Europe’, in Simone Maghenzani and Stefano Villani, eds. *British Protestant Missions and the Conversion of Europe, 1600-1900* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 78-101.

<sup>33</sup> For this charge of forced conversions, see John Coffey, ‘“The Jesuits Have Shed Much Blood for Christ”: Early Modern Protestants and the problem of Catholic Overseas Missions’, in Maghenzani and Villani, eds. *British Protestant Missions*, 40-41.

<sup>34</sup> Irene Fosi, *Inquisition, Conversion, and Foreigners in Baroque Rome* (Brill: Leiden/Boston, 2011), 193.

<sup>35</sup> ACDF St St II 1 – b, Mgr Stoppani to Card. Ottoboni, 18 Aug. 1732, unnumbered.

<sup>36</sup> Eliseo Masini, *Sacro Arsenal, ovvero Pratica dell’Officio della S. Inquisizione ampliata* (Genoa: Giuseppe Pavoni, 1625), 226. For Masini, see P. Fontana, ‘Masini, Eliseo’, in Adriano Prosperi, ed. *Dizionario Storico dell’Inquisizione*, 4 vols (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 2010) (hereafter *DSI*), 2:1006.



byn actually Catholicicks'.<sup>37</sup> Their religious error was perceived to be an involuntary consequence of their birth and upbringing acquired, in the words of Cardinal Deodato Scaglia, 'with their (mother's) milk'.<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, there was, to borrow Eamon Duffy's phrase, a 'loaves and fishes' aspect to conversion.<sup>39</sup> Protestants were given alms and provided with clothing as they were at Rome.<sup>40</sup> They were employed on board the Order's ships as soldiers, sailors, boat-swains, pilots, trumpeters and carpenters. Some of them also found work as cooks, hairdressers, coopers, blacksmiths, bakers and surgeons.<sup>41</sup> In addition to employment, they were offered lodging. Conversion carried a high price since converts could not return to their homelands, lest they fell back into heresy. They were expected to stay in some Catholic country, an expression of the connection between *regio* and *religio* and a confirmation of their choice of religion.<sup>42</sup> Converts in Rome had the possibility of being welcomed by a dedicated confraternity, like the *San Luigi dei Francesi*, which gave shelter to the French or *L'Arciconfraternita dello Spirito Santo* which catered for the needs of the Neapolitans.<sup>43</sup> Similar confraternities did not exist in Malta. There is scant information about where these foreigners were lodged. They could have stayed with an English merchant,<sup>44</sup> or, as in the case of Humphrey, a Presbyterian sailor on an English vessel in 1739, they may have been hosted by a religious order such as the Capuchins.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Albert J. Loomie, 'Religion and Elizabethan Commerce with Spain', *CHR* 50, no. 1 (1964): 36. For Robert Persons, see Stefania Tutino, 'The Political Thought of Robert Person's Conference in Continental Context', *Historical Journal* (hereafter *HJ*) 52 (2009): 43-62.

<sup>38</sup> AIM, Miscellanea (henceforth Misc.) 1, f. 19r. For Deodato Scaglia, see John Tedeschi, 'The Question of Magic and Witchcraft in Two Inquisitorial Manuals of the Seventeenth Century', in Tedeschi, *The prosecution of Heresy. Collected Studies on the Inquisition in Early Modern Italy* (Binghampton, NY: Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1991), 229-58.

<sup>39</sup> Eamon Duffy, "'Poor Protestant Flies": Conversions to Catholicism in Early Eighteenth-Century England', *Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian*, *Studies in Church History* 15 (1978), 297.

<sup>40</sup> AIM, Misc. 3, f. 26v.

<sup>41</sup> Data from AIM, Proc. 20A-139.

<sup>42</sup> De Boer, 'Soldati in Terra Straniera : La fede tra inquisizione e ragion di stato', in Gianvittorio Signorotto and Claudia Di Filippo Bareggi, eds. *L'inquisizione in età moderna e il caso Milanese* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2009), 423; Vincenzo Lavenia, 'Un porto nello Stato pontificio. Ancona e il Sant'Uffizio tra il Cinquecento e la Rivoluzione', in Andrea Cicerchia, Guido Dall'Olio and Matteo Duni, eds. *Presritto e Proscritto. Religione e Società nell'Italia Moderna*, secc. xvi-xix (Rome: Carocci, 2015), 113.

<sup>43</sup> Piero Ventura, *L'Arciconfraternita della Spirito Santo dei Napoletani a Roma tra XVI e XVIII Secolo* (Rome: ARACNE, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> AIM, Proc. 51A, ff. 143r-6v.

<sup>45</sup> AIM, Proc. 117B, ff. 520r-5v.



*Maltese responses to Protestants*

These enticements notwithstanding, heretics could be hard put to abandon their religion and thank providence for having brought them to a place where they could be instructed of the falsehood of their religion and recognize Catholicism as the true and only faith in which one could save one's soul.<sup>46</sup> This is amply shown in the case of Michael Signet, a 29-year-old 'Lutheran' bombardier on board the corsair ship of Captain Villaggi. When he fell ill in 1634, the hospital's prior and his assistant exhorted him to prepare himself to confess. When he refused he was removed from the great ward and put with the *buonavoglia* (galley rowers) in a little room beneath the hospital.<sup>47</sup> The conversation held between William, an English sailor from Plymouth, and the Discalced Carmelite Fra Alessio à S. Agatha in 1637 provides further evidence of the strategies used by the friars to approach these prospective converts, and the hostile response these might provoke. William told the friar angrily when he summoned him to his convent in February, 'Why have you called me? I have nothing to do with you and who are you?' The friar answered that he only desired to help him, to which William retorted, while accusing him of being a spy against the English nation, 'Do you want to make me a Turk and deceive me with your false errors as you did so many other Englishmen? They all complain that you forced them to embrace your errors against their wish'.<sup>48</sup> Consider, too, what Fra Jacobo à SSmo. Sacramento reported to Inquisitor Gori Pannellini on 2 January 1644:

Two Englishmen came to our convent twenty days ago. Robert, a short and fair lad, some twenty years of age, works on the boat that transports wine from Sicily to Malta. The other one, twenty-four-year-old Henry, is a tall and fair sailor on board the 'San Giovanni' . . . Being heretics I talked to them about faith and the errors of their sect . . . I hope that with the grace of God both of them would become Catholics.<sup>49</sup>

Protestants were further harassed by the local population who asked them how they had the temerity to stay in a Catholic country. There could be exceptions like Antonio Greco, who, contrary to Gregory XV's bull *Romani Pontificis* (1622),<sup>50</sup> rented them rooms in 1709,<sup>51</sup> but the Maltese generally resented their presence. Giovanni Luca is one of many examples. He notified Inquisitor Ludovico Serristori (1630-1631) on 2 October 1630 that 'a Sicilian soldier told me that

<sup>46</sup> AIM, Misc. 2, p. 2. Dario Visintin, *L'Attività dell'Inquisitore Fra Giulio Missini (1645-1653): L'Efficienza della Normalità* (Pordenone: University of Trieste, 2008), 195.

<sup>47</sup> AIM, Proc. 50B, ff. 919r-27v. On this point, see also Paul Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London, Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1964), 54-5.

<sup>48</sup> AIM, Proc. 52A, ff. 316r-25v.

<sup>49</sup> AIM, Proc. 58B, ff. 572r-3v.

<sup>50</sup> AIM, Misc. 1, f. 61r.

<sup>51</sup> AIM, Proc. 102B, f. 739r.

the crew of this vessel are all Lutherans'.<sup>52</sup> There is no sequel to this incident but in other cases, English Protestants were made to pay for being rashly outspoken. William Garuel, a gunner from Ashby, disturbed the common peace by vicious words, including the remark that one should pray only to God and not the saints. He was picked up on 13 April 1612 and made to recant.<sup>53</sup>

In reporting these heretics, delators followed the directives of their confessors who reminded them of their duty to denounce them under threat of excommunication.<sup>54</sup> So too did the inquisition's edicts of faith that were published regularly during mass.<sup>55</sup> Thus the Carmelite friar, 'padre maestro' Hagius, in accordance with the admonitions of Cardinal Desiderio Scaglia, the author of the manual 'Prattica per procedere nelle cause del S. Offizio',<sup>56</sup> warned his congregation in 1663 to inform on their neighbours to unearth all traces of heresy: 'Good God, are they not half Christians those who don't mind the edicts of our prelate? The silence with which they try to hide their own and others' errors amounts to infidelity'.<sup>57</sup>

### *Agents of conversion*

The mention of this Carmelite friar leads us to the members of the religious orders, who were the most assiduous agents of conversion. They also included the Dominicans,<sup>58</sup> the Capuchins,<sup>59</sup> the Jesuits,<sup>60</sup> the Minims<sup>61</sup> and, in particular, the Discalced Carmelites at Cospicua. The latter appear to have been great participants in this mission of re-education and conversion, their convent being a kind of conversion institution, like the English college<sup>62</sup> and the *Ospizio Apostolico dei Convertendi* at Rome.<sup>63</sup> Such places were 'a visible beacon of the true

<sup>52</sup> AIM, Proc. 48C, ff. 1159r-62v.

<sup>53</sup> AIM, Proc. 30B, ff. 399r-408v.

<sup>54</sup> For the role of confessors to direct their penitents to the holy office, see Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition*, 363-5; Adriano Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), 219-43; G. Paolin, 'Inquisizione e Confessori nel Seicento in Friuli: Analisi di un Rapporto', in A. Del Col and G. Paolin, eds. *Inquisizione Romana in Italia nell'Età Moderna. Archivi, Problemi di Metodo, e Nuove Ricerche* (Rome: Archivi di Stato, 1991), 181-2.

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, AIM, Proc. 54A, f. 4r.

<sup>56</sup> AIM, Misc. 2, pp. 6-10. For Cardinal Desiderio Scaglia, a Dominican cardinal and member of the supreme congregation of the Roman inquisition, see Tedeschi, 'The Question of Magic', 229-61. See also Thomas F. Mayer, *The Roman Inquisition. A Papal Bureaucracy and its Laws in the Age of Galileo* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 68-71.

<sup>57</sup> Archivio Secreto Vaticano, Segreteria di Stato (Malta) 186, ff. 143r-50v.

<sup>58</sup> For the English Dominican friar Charles McDermot, see ACDF, St St HH 4 - e, unnumbered.

<sup>59</sup> AIM, Proc. 124B, f. 867v.

<sup>60</sup> AIM, Proc. 104A, ff. 260r-5v.

<sup>61</sup> AIM, Proc. 124A, f. 294r.

<sup>62</sup> Fosi, *Inquisition, Conversion and Foreigners*, 33-42.

<sup>63</sup> Sergio Pagano, 'L'Ospizio dei Convertendi di Roma fra charisma missionario e regolamentazione ecclesiastica (1673-1700)', *Ricerche per la Storia religiosa di Roma* 10 (1998): 313-90; Anu Raunio, *Conversioni al Cattolicesimo a Roma tra Sei e Settecento. La presenza degli scandinavi nell'Ospizio dei Convertendi* (Turku: University of Turku, 2009).

faith, a place of reception and protection, and a safe conduit for a new life in the host society'.<sup>64</sup> It was here that in 1757 Raphael Robinson of Newcastle, like several others of his countrymen, came to seek advice from padre Carlo Felice à Santa Rosa.<sup>65</sup> There was always an English friar resident there and English Protestants certainly preferred to communicate in their own language and recount their story without an intermediary. Here they were afforded the opportunity to establish stable relationships with some of their Catholic compatriots and start a path towards conversion.

The religious orders did not confront their responsibilities alone; they were dependent on the enthusiasm of a handful of English Catholics resident in Malta. It was Captain Robert, an Englishman resident at Valletta, who in 1614 counselled Thomas Pope and John Plumer to renounce their confessional identity.<sup>66</sup> Both John Casey of Newport<sup>67</sup> and the Londoner Edward Harden, a sailor on board the corsair ship of the grand duke of Modena,<sup>68</sup> abandoned their religion under the guidance of James Cole, an English hairdresser married in Malta.<sup>69</sup> Alexander Young, the indefatigable English Catholic consul (1714-1745), endeavoured to convert his countrymen, too. For this purpose, he translated into English Robert Bellarmine's *Doctrina Christiana* (1593) and a *Breve Compendio della Dottrina Cristiana ad uso de' Sudditi della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana* (Rome/Palermo, 1714).<sup>70</sup> These catechetical texts explained the principal parts of the Christian doctrine and functioned in some circumstances, as Alexandra Walsham argues, as a kind of 'surrogate' priesthood.<sup>71</sup>

A more aggressive text and proselytising tool was Henry Turberville's (d. 1678), *An Abridgment of Christian Doctrine With Proofs of Scripture for Points Controverted*, published in 1680.<sup>72</sup> Like Peter Canisius' catechisms and Laurence Vaux's *A Catechisme, or a Christian Doctrine Necessarie for Chyldren and the Ignorant people*

<sup>64</sup> Fosi, *Inquisition, Conversion and Foreigners*, 29.

<sup>65</sup> AIM, Proc. 124B, ff. 867r-72v.

<sup>66</sup> AIM, Proc. 35A, ff. 220r-3v, 232r-5v.

<sup>67</sup> AIM, Proc. 135A, ff. 334r-41v.

<sup>68</sup> AIM, Proc. 132A, ff. 87r-94r.

<sup>69</sup> He had married Catarina on 14 November 1758. See PA (Vittoriosa), Liber Matrimoniorum IV, f. 28v. Other English Catholics in Malta were William Whiteford, a gunner on the *San Vincenzo*, who resided at Senglea in 1780 (Curia Episcopalis Melitensae, Acta Originalia 780, ff. 23v-4r), John, vice-pilot of one of the ships of the Order, married at Senglea (1745) (AIM, Proc. 122A, f. 323v) and Daniel, married at Cospicua (1753) (AIM, Proc. 122B, f. 636r).

<sup>70</sup> ACDF, St St HH 4 – e, Mgr Gualtieri to Card. Ottoboni, 24 May 1740.

<sup>71</sup> Alexandra Walsham, "'Domme Preachers'": Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print', *Past and Present* 168 (2000): 72-123 at p. 80.

<sup>72</sup> *An Abridgment of Christian Doctrine With Proofs of Scripture for Points Controverted, Catechistically explained, by Way of Question and Answer* (Basle, 1680). Thirty copies of this catechism were sent by the Holy Office to Mgr Inquisitor Gualtieri in 1742. See ACDF, St St HH 4 – e, 30 Aug. 1742.

(Louvain, 1568), this was a polemical weapon, replete with vehement denunciations. Tuberville started with the recognition that Protestants identify themselves as the people of the book, claiming for Holy Writ the sole and ultimate authority in matters of faith and conduct'; therefore his exposition of Catholic doctrine rested solidly on scripture.<sup>73</sup> His work engaged with those matters on which Protestants disagreed most with Catholics. It pushed Protestants to realise that they contradicted themselves when they claimed that they differed from Catholics only in opinion and not in *fundamentals* or *faith*: 'They accuse us of Sacriledg, of robbing God of his honor, and committing idolatry, of believing in Priestly absolution from sins, adoring the B. Sacrament of the Eucharist, and praying to Saints. Are not these matters of high Fundamentals of the Catholick Faith rather than of indifferency?'<sup>74</sup> The *Abridgment* further explained that indulgences 'are a releasing only of such temporal punishments as remain due to those sins which have already been forgiven us by penance and confession' and not, as the Protestants 'falsely and slanderously' teach, 'a pardon for sins to come, or leave to commit sin.'<sup>75</sup> Nor is praying in an unknown tongue a mere mouthing of words 'for he that speakes in a Tongue (unknown) speaks not to men, but to God (1. Cor. 14. 2)'.<sup>76</sup>

The *Abridgment's* tone was overtly contentious. Protestants, Tuberville asserted, hold the Church to be invisible 'because we have convinced them that there were no *Protestants* to be seen or heard of in the Wurld before Martin Luther.' The antiquity of the Church was emphasized as opposed to the fragmented reformed sects, her direct line from Christ and not her having been founded by Luther. Tuberville asserted that the 'pretended *Reformers*' say that *Miracles* are ceased 'because they and their sect-masters have never yet been able to do any in confirmation of their errors'.<sup>77</sup> Protestants teach that the commandments are 'impossible to be kept because they are not willing to oblige themselves to the observance of them, but had rather make God the author of sin, by commanding impossibilities (a most high blasphemy).' Lastly, their communion was dismissed as 'only a bit of baker's bread, with a poor sup of common vintners' wine'.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>73</sup> AIM, Proc. 132A, ff. 87r-94v. Alexandra Walsham, 'Wholesome milk and strong meat: Peter Canisius's Catechism and the conversion of Protestant Britain', *British Catholic History* 32, no. 3 (2015): 1-22. For the case of Richard Getter of London, who was made to see his errors in 1603 through the sacred scripture, see AIM, Proc. 21A, ff. 328r-32v.

<sup>74</sup> *An Abridgment of Christian Doctrine*, 42-3.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>77</sup> That the apostolic gift of miracles ceased after the first century, see D. P. Walker, 'The Cessation of Miracles', in Ingrid Merkel and Alan G. Debus, eds. *Hermeticism and the Renaissance* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), 111-24.

<sup>78</sup> *An Abridgment of Christian Doctrine*, 47, 126, 158-9, 208.

Following the directions of the manual *Sacro Arsenale*, catechising was meant to make the Protestants know the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism as well as make them familiar with the Catholic faith and its rituals.<sup>79</sup> This was particularly needed with those like Thomas, who in 1603 described himself as ‘a rustic and a most ignorant man’.<sup>80</sup> For many, probably most, Englishmen, though, the distinct divisions between the two faiths were all too visible. Take John Smith of Sunderland, who testified before Inquisitor Fabrizio Verallo (1600-1605) on 23 March 1603 before abjuring his heresy. He believed in only two sacraments, baptism and the eucharist, even if the latter is performed only in memory of Christ’s passion. He despised auricular confession, saying that a man cannot absolve other men’s sins and denied the authority of the pope as the vicar of Christ, the successor of St Peter and the head of the universal Church. Nor did he believe in the apostolic tradition or in the ‘magisterium’ of the Church as the interpreter of scriptures. He condemned indulgences and refused the cult of holy images and prayers to the saints. He also denied the existence of purgatory, the eucharist as the body and blood of Christ, and the sacrificial nature of the mass which can be offered as suffrage for the dead.<sup>81</sup>

#### *Motivations for conversion*

These Protestants were isolated from their native environment and lacked the support of friends and family; but they were not always easy prey to the local clergy and their arguments. The initial unwillingness of some to concede anything to the Catholic faith testified to their nourishing their own religion and refusing to compromise their conscience, clinging fast to their ideals and their Protestant identity. They protested that ‘everyone holds one’s religion to be the best one’ and that ‘nobody can be certain of the truth’.<sup>82</sup> The way others reasoned is illuminating: ‘it would be better to lose two fingers than become Catholics’.<sup>83</sup> Another Protestant stated that ‘whoever came to a Catholic country must be a blockhead; he had better stayed in Turkey where he could profess the Lutheran religion’.<sup>84</sup> John Moore reasoned in 1648 that ‘those who let the devil whisper in their ears to leave their faith must be madmen or even beasts’.<sup>85</sup> There are also examples of Protestants who made their stand not so much on some doctrinal argument or declaration of personal faith as on their

<sup>79</sup> Masini, *Sacro Arsenale*, 226-31.

<sup>80</sup> AIM, Proc. 21B, ff. 771r-3Av.

<sup>81</sup> AIM, Proc. 21A, ff. 303r-4r.

<sup>82</sup> AIM, Proc. 55B, f. 572r.

<sup>83</sup> AIM, Proc. 111B, f. 624v.

<sup>84</sup> AIM, Proc. 45B, f. 1139v.

<sup>85</sup> AIM, Proc. 61A, f. 565v.

refusal to disown their family and cultural roots. They could not abandon the religion into which they had been born and brought up. Additionally, as Edward Tucker of London objected in 1706, they would never believe that their parents were damned, there being no salvation outside the Catholic Church.<sup>86</sup>

These dissenting voices deserve attention because they lead us to ask about possible dissimulation amongst those Protestants who renounced their faith. There are no easy answers to this difficult question.<sup>87</sup> Firstly, what we know about these converts has been filtered through the lens of the inquisition and the chancellor who recorded its proceedings. Secondly, the narratives these individuals presented about their ‘conversions’ were shaped by inherited literary tropes, for example, that early exposure to Catholicism laid the foundations for later conversion. Even so, as Eamon Duffy reminds us, one should not exclude the possibility that motives other than self-interest did prompt some of them to convert.<sup>88</sup> These included those who, tormented by doubts about their faith, would have had already begun a path to conversion, as a result, for instance, of their own reading, or of the example and advice of Catholic friends. A documented case of a death-bed conversion occurred in 1705 when John Brown of London was mortally injured through a fall off the Valletta bastion. He called on the ministers of the Holy Office to pacify his conscience.<sup>89</sup> We may also include here those who would have behaved in accordance with the Protestant faith only outwardly, whilst inwardly they espoused a different set of beliefs.<sup>90</sup> They were only ‘vehemently’ suspect of heresy since, as Cardinal Giulio Antonio Santoro reminded Mgr Verallo in 1602, ‘formal apostasy is the result of intention and belief and not of exterior facts’.<sup>91</sup> These were the men who would have become Protestants either to please their relatives<sup>92</sup> or not to be labelled papists and face potential persecution.<sup>93</sup> William German of London explained in 1709 that his trouble arose from the presence of multiple religious affiliations in the home, having been born into a mixed marriage. He lived as an Anglican according to his father’s will, but his mother transmitted secretly her Catholic religion to him.<sup>94</sup> William Biles from Liverpool provides another example of those who did not necessarily compromise their inner faith. He was

<sup>86</sup> AIM, Proc. 98A, f. 388r.

<sup>87</sup> N. Rothman, ‘Becoming Venetian: conversion and transformation in the seventeenth-century Mediterranean’, *Mediterranean Historical Review* 21 (2006): 39-75.

<sup>88</sup> Duffy, “‘Poor Protestant Flies’”, 298.

<sup>89</sup> AIM, Proc. 98B, ff. 426r-31v.

<sup>90</sup> AIM, Proc. 59A, ff. 186r-9v.

<sup>91</sup> AIM, Corr. 1, f. 127r, Card. Santoro to Mgr. Verallo, 9 March 1602.

<sup>92</sup> AIM, Proc. 110A, ff. 132r-5v.

<sup>93</sup> AIM, Proc. 21A, ff. 298r-301v, 308r-9v.

<sup>94</sup> AIM, Proc. 101B, ff. 317r-22v.

born in a Catholic family but at the age of four he was brought up by his Protestant paternal aunt. However, he told the inquisition that the recollections of Catholicism could not be erased, being deeply rooted in his mind. He could not put aside his Catholic identity and in 1642 he appeared before Inquisitor Gori Pannellini to profess his faith in the Catholic Church.<sup>95</sup>

Even so, if it is wrong to overlook the element of sincere conviction, conversion was rarely stimulated by religious concerns alone and the conversion narratives should not be regarded as the painful and successful abandonment of error. Importantly, these Protestants could not have embraced and fully internalized the new religion during their short period of indoctrination. Matthew Robson, a thirty-six-year-old pilot from Newcastle, had been in Malta only a month before he appeared before Mgr Passionei on 22 November 1744 to recant.<sup>96</sup> The notion of an honest and complete life-changing experience, a real crisis of faith, a fundamentally decisive moment in one's life, must be discarded in most instances. Instead, these conversions should be appropriately historicized and firmly placed within the social and cultural context to which they belong.

Conversion narratives are shaped by later concerns, by the need of self-justification. As Paul Gewirtz argues: 'all storytelling, after all, is transactional, with listeners affecting tellers as well as tellers affecting listeners'.<sup>97</sup> The story teller's account reflected his present situation and the past was interpreted in terms of what he wanted to show.<sup>98</sup> It should not be assumed that the inquisitors were so gullible not to realise that the anecdotes presented to them could contain half-truths and lies, and were full of the intentions of the story tellers.<sup>99</sup> As in the case of apostates to Islam, the inquisitors in Malta were driven to allow the greatest number possible of Protestants to enter the Catholic Church rapidly and easily. Accordingly, they were not particularly inquisitive about the heretics' motives for discarding Protestantism. They listened to their life-stories, including recollections of their past, of their

<sup>95</sup> AIM, Proc. 55A, ff. 542r-7v.

<sup>96</sup> AIM, Proc. 120A, ff. 436r-41v.

<sup>97</sup> P. Gewirtz, 'Victims and Voyeurs: Two Narrative Problems at the Criminal Trial', in P. Brooks and P. Gewirtz, eds. *Law's Stories: Narratives and Rhetoric in the Law* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 144.

<sup>98</sup> P. Fredriksen, 'Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self', *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 33. See also M. García-Arenal, 'Dreams and Reason: Autobiographies of Converts in Religious Polemics', in García-Arenal, ed. *Conversions Islamiques. Identité religieuses en Islam méditerranéen* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001), 102.

<sup>99</sup> N. Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1987).



homeland and relatives. They may not necessarily have believed what they were told, remarking ‘come dicesti’ (as you say).<sup>100</sup>

Conversion was often motivated by some material interest, which can be interpreted as the Protestants’ reaction to their everyday encounters with the dominant religion. They were engaged in a personal negotiation that furthered their economic fortunes and made accommodations with the local religion in order to enter employment; here religion alone may have counted for less than financial opportunity. Changing faith in the hope this would lead to better treatment must have struck some of them as their only means of self-preservation. Like the Protestants at Livorno, some at least of those in Malta underwent conversions of convenience; they seemed to align with Stefano Villani’s assertion that they converted ‘to integrate into the society in which they had decided to live rather than by a mature conviction of the truth of the Catholic doctrines or the rejection of those which they had professed until then’.<sup>101</sup> Put differently, these men divested themselves of their ‘alien’ status and created a new identity through which they could negotiate their inclusion in the dominant culture. Conversion, as William Monter has observed for Protestants in seventeenth-century Valencia, enhanced the possibility of better employment prospects.<sup>102</sup> This possibility seemed to be a major factor in the case of Thomas Redock.<sup>103</sup> He rejected Protestantism in 1723 to better his desperate condition and free himself from the galleys, the press gang having become the chief means of recruitment by the 1690s in England.<sup>104</sup> John Baptist of Dover was condemned to serve on the penal galleys of the Hospitallers for life in 1715. He wrongly assumed that his galley sentence would be reduced if he recanted.<sup>105</sup> Meanwhile, other Protestants may have been motivated to change their religion if, like William Meret, they intended to marry and start a new life in Malta.<sup>106</sup> Conversion to Catholicism was an indispensable condition for their integration into Maltese society.

<sup>100</sup> AIM, Proc. 35A, ff. 232r-5v. For court narratives as reliable historical sources, see Frans Ciappara, ‘Conversion Narratives and the Roman Inquisition in Malta, 1650-1700’, *Journal of Religious History* 40, no. 4 (2016): 508-11; Linda Colley, *Captives. Britain, Empire and the World 1600-1850* (London: Pimlico, 2003), 84-5; James L. Peacock and Dorothy C. Holland, ‘The Narrated Self: Life Stories in Process’, *Ethos* 21, no. 4 (1993): 367-83.

<sup>101</sup> Stefano Villani, ‘Unintentional Dissent. Eating Meat and Religious Identity among British Residents in Early Modern Livorno’, in Katherine Aron-Beller and Christopher Black, eds. *The Roman Inquisition: Centre versus Peripheries* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 380.

<sup>102</sup> William Monter, *Frontiers of Heresy. The Spanish Inquisition from the Basque Lands to Sicily* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 251.

<sup>103</sup> AIM, Proc. 108A, ff. 203r-8v.

<sup>104</sup> Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin, 1991), 67.

<sup>105</sup> AIM, Proc. 106C, ff. 894r-9v. On this point, see Lucia Rostagno, *Mi Faccio Turco. Esperienze ed immagini dell’Islam nell’Italia moderna* (Roma: Istituto per l’Oriente C. A. Nallino, 1983), passim.

<sup>106</sup> AIM, Proc. 48B, f. 759r.

The second point to remember regarding these Protestants' conversion is to follow Linda Colley's warning not to conceptualise history 'in a Manichean fashion so as to emphasize opposition and antagonism'.<sup>107</sup> Fernand Braudel always insisted that below the surface of its sharp political and religious divisions, the Mediterranean region was characterized by crossings and collaborations between governments as well as individuals.<sup>108</sup> The Mediterranean world, Molly Greene further reminds us, was often a shared and interdependent one.<sup>109</sup> Catholic Malta imported not only coal, salted fish, salmon, herrings in brine and salted butter from Britain, but also all different types of cheese, cutlery, Manchester cloth and dried codfish.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, Malta's relations with Protestant England had grown so cordial by the 1760s that the English Catholic consul John Dodsworth and Malta's 'foreign minister' Fabrizio Grech discussed an integration plan between the two countries, proposing that Malta have two seats in the House of Commons.<sup>111</sup> Malta, like Genoa, was also dependent on Britain for mercenaries, making its armed forces what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other'.<sup>112</sup> One example will suffice to prove this point. In 1645 Carlo Valdina, an Italian Hospitaller knight from Messina, faced with the prospect of a Turkish attack on Malta during the Cretan war (1645-1669) enrolled, among several other Protestants, John Fech of London, Joseph May of Plymouth, Edward Aldry of Kent, Charles Werth of York and John Chapman of Bristol.<sup>113</sup> These mercenaries were engaged regardless of their faith and only according to their military capacity.<sup>114</sup> They represent a common figure in European history and formed part of those masses who, notwithstanding the supposed politico-religious lockdown (*chiusure*) of the era of confessionalisation, crossed with notable frequency the barriers of European states.<sup>115</sup> Peter Mazur describes the presence of these foreign troops as 'one of the

<sup>107</sup> Colley, *Captives*, 69.

<sup>108</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (London: Collins, 1972).

<sup>109</sup> Molly Greene, *A Shared World. Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>110</sup> M. D'Angelo, *Mercanti Inglesi a Malta, 1800-1825* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1990), 56. M. D'Angelo, *Mercanti Inglesi a Livorno 1573-1737* (Messina: Istituto di Studi Storici Gaetano Salvemini, 2004).

<sup>111</sup> See Frans Ciappara, 'Integration with Britain in the Eighteenth Century?', in T. Cortis, Th. Freller, L. Bugeja, eds. *Melitensium Amor. Festschrift in honour of Dun Ġwann Azzopardi* (Malta: 2002), 237-9.

<sup>112</sup> P. Fontana, 'Protestanti e Inquisitori a Genova tra i Secoli XVI-XVIII. Il Problema della Militia Germanica', *Nuova Rivista Storica* 80 (1996): 211-20; Mary Louise Pratt, 'Arts of the contact zone', *Profession* 91 (1991):33-40.

<sup>113</sup> AIM, Proc. 59A, ff. 162r-85v.

<sup>114</sup> For the same situation in Venice, see Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*.

<sup>115</sup> S. Peyronel, 'Frontiere religiose e soldati in antico regime: il caso di Crema nel Seicento', in C. Donati, ed. *Alle frontiere della Lombardia. Politica, guerra e religione nell'età moderna* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2006), 19-40.

largest grey zones within an apparently homogeneous Catholic society'.<sup>116</sup> He was not alone: Ian Almond acknowledged as much when he called the composition of these armies a palpable challenge to the constructed dichotomies of East and West. He refers to battles as crucial as the Ottoman attack against Vienna (1529), when Hungarian Protestants marched along the Ottoman army.<sup>117</sup>

These men, it has been said, 'knew no frontiers',<sup>118</sup> there being a fluid and shifting boundary between the faiths.<sup>119</sup> These rootless men appeared to move between the various religious, cultural and political poles and adapting themselves easily to their new religious environment. 'Conversion' was by no means a transition from an old world to a new one but a transition within a complex religious culture.

This remark brings us to a fundamental point. Not only were confessional boundaries porous but, following Tony Claydon's argument, Christendom was as strong an identity for the English as Protestantism. Britain, for instance, overcame her confessional suspicions and joined Catholic powers against Louis XIV (1643-1715) not only to maintain the balance of power but, giving this political discourse a religious dimension, to defend the whole faith, and not just its reformed version.<sup>120</sup> Stephen Conway argues that the continuing idea of Christendom 'acted as an antidote to the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants and undercut the rhetoric of international Protestantism'.<sup>121</sup> Britain joined the other Christian countries against whoever failed to live up to Christian precepts. Conway brings up the case of the French Revolution, whose atheism made Protestants look upon Catholics as allies. 'So long as there was perceived to be a potent threat to Christianity in Europe ... the scope for the different Christian denominations to emphasize what they had in common, rather than what separated them, should not be ignored'.<sup>122</sup>

We might not know exactly, therefore, why people converted and how much truth there was, for instance, in John Steward's claim in 1642 that he had forsaken his religion to obey his father's last wish

<sup>116</sup> Peter A. Mazur, *Conversion to Catholicism in Early Modern Italy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 98.

<sup>117</sup> Ian Almond, *Two Faiths, One Banner: When Muslims marched with Christians across Europe's Battlegrounds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>118</sup> Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*, 112.

<sup>119</sup> Frans Ciappara, "'The date palm and the olive tree': Safeguarding the Catholic Frontier in Malta (c.1595-c.1605)", in Dionisius A. Agius, ed. *Georgio Scala and the Moorish Slaves. The Inquisition Malta 1598* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2013), 253-79.

<sup>120</sup> See Tony Claydon's works: *Europe and the Making of England*, 187, 219; *William III and the Godly Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 4 and 'The Church of England and the Churches of Europe', in Grant Tapsell, ed. *The Later Stuart Church, 1660-1714* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 314-31.

<sup>121</sup> Stephen Conway, 'Christians, Catholics, Protestants: The Religious Links of Britain and Ireland with Continental Europe, c. 1689-1800', *EHR* 124, no. 509 (2009), 833-862, at p. 849.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 862.

before he died.<sup>123</sup> Nor can we know with certainty that it was really the magnificence of the Catholic liturgy that truly overwhelmed the Calvinist John Francis in 1704.<sup>124</sup> It is difficult likewise to ascertain the spiritual itinerary of those heretics who narrated to the inquisitor a number of factors, some more specific than others.<sup>125</sup> Had they been inspired by God,<sup>126</sup> or did they owe their conversion to Catholicism to some miracle, whether that was the healing of their eyes,<sup>127</sup> or, as in the case of Humphrey Wakehouse, being saved from shipwreck?<sup>128</sup>

There are good reasons to believe that some of these Protestants could have disguised their true intentions and changed their religious identity according to circumstances.<sup>129</sup> This internal dissociation from Catholicism, and their ability to camouflage their convictions, is virtually impossible to detect from the outside. It is often difficult to comprehend their mentality and the range of motives that drove them to take this step, but ample evidence suggests that some of them did not discard their old faith. A letter from Cardinal Francesco Barberini to Inquisitor Gori Pannellini dated 1643 notes that there is 'evidence that their conversions are of pure interest and not the result of a healthy conscience.' Barberini warned that they only wanted him to help them recover their salaries which their ship captains owed them, and he counselled Pannellini not to intervene unnecessarily in the matter.<sup>130</sup>

The cardinal may have been correct in his assessment. A captain of an English ship appeared before Inquisitor Stoppani in 1736 and protested that three of his sailors had recanted their faith only to spite him and not because they had been truly called by God.<sup>131</sup> It is no wonder, then, that ship captains put their men in chains not to go to the holy office<sup>132</sup> or that Captain Vinciguerra threatened in 1616 to attack the palace of the inquisition with his artillery if his men approached the tribunal.<sup>133</sup> That these heretics were not sincere in their intentions was the firm belief, too, of the aforementioned John Dodsworth.<sup>134</sup> He condemned what he called the dissimulation tactics of his

<sup>123</sup> AIM, Proc. 55A, ff. 504r-9v.

<sup>124</sup> AIM, Proc. 98A, ff. 208r-11v.

<sup>125</sup> On this, see Jane Wickersham, 'Results of the Reformation: Ritual, Doctrine and Religious Conversion', *The Seventeenth Century* 18, no. 2 (2003): 266-89.

<sup>126</sup> For the case of George David, a 33-year-old Protestant from London, see AIM, Proc. 104A, ff. 282r-7v.

<sup>127</sup> AIM, Proc. 106A, ff. 29r-34v.

<sup>128</sup> AIM, Proc. 117B, ff. 520r-5v.

<sup>129</sup> For the same situation in Spain, see Croft, 'Englishmen and the Spanish Inquisition', 261.

<sup>130</sup> AIM, Corr. 8, f. 59r, Card. Francesco Barberini to Mgr. Gori Pannellini, 30 May 1643. For one more such example, involving William Sweetlock of Hull who came to Malta in 1637, see AIM, Proc. 52B, ff. 791r-8v.

<sup>131</sup> ACDF, St St II 1 – b, Mgr Stoppani to Card. Ottoboni, 23 June 1736, unnumbered.

<sup>132</sup> AIM, Proc. 124B, f. 938v.

<sup>133</sup> AIM, Proc. 37A, ff. 71r-7v.

<sup>134</sup> For his Protestant leanings, see Frans Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition*, 113.

Protestant countrymen and, like his counterpart in the Canary Islands, reserved the most debasing words for them, calling them drunkards and ruffraff.<sup>135</sup> Not even ecclesiastical immunity deterred him from his purpose. At the time of Inquisitor Paolo Passionei (1743-1754), he fetched back two young sailors from the convent of the Discalced Carmelites where they were being catechised by *padre* Riccardo à Sant'Angelo.<sup>136</sup> This case, while striking, is not exceptional. In 1757 three English sailors took shelter in the Dominican convent of Porto Salvo at Valletta. Dodsworth, worried about the security risk to the religious communities and trying to avoid an 'ineffective' conversion, sent six officers to look for them and expressed surprise that Don Giacinto Maggi, the parish priest, dared put his convent in danger of being attacked.<sup>137</sup>

These travellers, who recounted adventurous tales, traversed religious space and confessional divisions and often adapted their faith in the hope of a better life. To adopt Brian Pullan's happy phrase, they sailed on 'a ship with two rudders'.<sup>138</sup> Like Martin Cociner they tried to harmonise their religious attitudes with the circumstances in which they found themselves, Protestants in England, Muslims in Arab countries and Catholics in Malta. Cociner, an 18-year-old from the Isle of Wight, started serving on English ships at the age of eight. He was captured by Algerian corsairs off Cape St Vincent, who sold him to a 'Turk'. According to what he told Inquisitor Antonio Pignatelli in 1647 he was made to apostatise, being given the name of Jusuf, but at Algiers a Spanish Catholic slave 'taught me that Catholicism is the true faith'.<sup>139</sup> Captain Dionin and his twenty-nine crew are another good example of these conversions of convenience. Having lost their ship to Maltese corsairs in 1603 near Cape Passaro, they were put in chains, brought to the prisons of the Holy Office in Malta and made to abjure their heresy as 'people suspect to the Catholic faith'.<sup>140</sup> However, having been released, in May 1604 they attacked a ship carrying wine, biscuits and other merchandise to Malta and hurled insults at the Catholic crew. Loudly proclaiming they were Protestants, they put on a Franciscan habit which they found on board and jokingly

<sup>135</sup> For this Edmund Smith, who was charged of ill-treating English converts to Catholicism and of deterring others from the same course by threats, see L. De Laberti and A. B. Wallis Chapman, 'English Traders and the Spanish Canary Inquisition in the Canaries during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Third Series 3 (1909): 244-5.

<sup>136</sup> AIM, Proc. 124A, ff. 74v-5r.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 71v-2r.

<sup>138</sup> Brian Pullan, 'A Ship with two rudders: Righetto Marrano and the Inquisition in Venice', *HJ* 20 (1977): 25-58.

<sup>139</sup> AIM, Proc. 63, ff. 538r-43v.

<sup>140</sup> AIM, Proc. 22A, ff. 136r-72v. For similar incidents, see AIM, Proc. 22B, ff. 489r-667v and AIM, Proc. 22C, ff. 789r-936v.

blessed the crew with the words *Dominus vobiscum* ('The Lord be with you').<sup>141</sup>

There could be lurking, therefore, a heretic beneath the foreigner's outward appearance. The story of David Bonnell in 1701 provides some fascinating possibilities. As a hardened Nicodemite,<sup>142</sup> a hypocrite or a religious amphibian whose Catholicism affected only outer conformity, he adapted himself to the Catholic customs only to avoid the attention of the Church authorities. As a crypto Protestant he conformed to Catholic practices not to remain conspicuous. This was an insurance policy to dispel any doubts regarding his religious conviction and in order to marry the woman he cherished, Generosa, the daughter of the late English consul Alexander Young. From Malta he went to Messina as vice-consul of the English nation there before making his way to London, where he declared himself an Anglican.<sup>143</sup> His conscience must have pricked him so that, like Francesco Spiera, an Italian lawyer from Cittadella, who abjured his Protestantism in St Mark's Venice in 1547 to die in despair,<sup>144</sup> he wavered in doubt and uncertainty. He poured out his 'great sin of hypocrisy' in a letter he wrote to the Holy Office in Malta, dated London, 5 May 1701:

I swore to several things in my abjuration ... which I knew to be false and which I would not do even if I were to die ... but I feared for my life ... I profess Anglicanism, founded on sacred scripture, the foundation of orthodoxy, and for which reason the religion of the Roman Catholics is not the true faith, maintaining as it does beliefs which cannot be proved by the Word of God, such as transubstantiation, purgatory, praying to the saints ... adoring images and praying to God publicly in church not in one's language... I can say many other things but it would be of little use. All I said was to quieten my conscience... I immediately returned to England when I realised the great danger that would accrue to my soul if I were to die in that hypocrisy. I would rather beg my bread here enjoying my religion than staying with great profit in that danger to my soul because if we gain the whole world and lose our soul, what benefit is that? ... I implore you to spread the news that I am still a Protestant ...<sup>145</sup>

### Conclusion

One can only speculate why Protestants modified their birth identity in Malta by becoming Catholics but the fact that they did says much

<sup>141</sup> AIM, Proc. 23B, ff. 528r-39v.

<sup>142</sup> This term refers to the Pharisee Nicodemus, who visited Jesus only in the dead of night. See Carlo Ginzburg, *Il nicodemismo. Simulazione e dissimulazione nell'Europa del '500* (Turin: Biblioteca di Cultura Storica, 1970); J. J. Martin, 'Nicodemismo', DSI, 2:1115-6; A. Rotondò, 'Atteggiamenti della vita morale italiana del Cinquecento: La Pratica Nicodemitica', *Rivista Storica Italiana* 79 (1967): 991-1030.

<sup>143</sup> His wife determined to return to Malta in 1701 and asked Mgr di Messerano for help, lest her children became Protestant, one of them having already done so. See ACDF, St St HH 4 - c, Mgr di Messerano to Card. Maressotti, 22 Oct. 1701.

<sup>144</sup> Adriano Prosperi, '1548. Il caso Spiera: una morte disperata', in Prosperi, ed., *L'eresia del Libro Grande. Storia di Giorgio Siculo e della sua setta* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2000), 102-22.

<sup>145</sup> AIM, Proc. 96A, ff. 95r-8v.

about their view of religion in their life. One can agree with Jeremy Black that anti-Catholicism was 'arguably the prime ideological commitment of most of the population (of Britain)'.<sup>146</sup> Britons were staunch Protestants, fearful of 'popery', brought up as they were on John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and John Bunyan's classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*.<sup>147</sup> However, it bears repeating Daphne Lappa's observation that people within the Mediterranean were not mutually exclusive, perceiving those with a different faith as 'others' altogether.<sup>148</sup> Put differently, the Catholic 'other' was not as unapproachable to the Protestants as it is commonly conceived. The sources do not allow us to perceive the motivations of converts to Catholicism, but, 'pushed' as they were towards conversion by the inquisitors, the religious orders and the local population, some of these seamen were as sincere as much as dissimulating.

<sup>146</sup> Jeremy Black, *Natural and Necessary Enemies: Anglo-French Relations in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 161.

<sup>147</sup> For the influence of these two books, see Colley, *Britons*, 25-9.

<sup>148</sup> Daphne Lappa, 'Religious conversions within the Venetian military milieu (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries)', *Studi Veneziani* 67 (2013): 183-200.