

PROTESTANT PROPAGANDA IN MALTA (1800-30)

AS WE have said in our previous article,¹ Great Britain had, on several occasions, renewed her assurances to protect the Catholic Religion in Malta, and most particularly in the commissions to newly-appointed Governors of these Islands. But let us not forget that Great Britain is a Protestant Country, and as such, while promising to safeguard all the interests of our Church, she would not let her Protestant subjects spiritually unprotected in the Island. The Catholic minority in Britain were, particularly with the Emancipation Act of 1829,² gradually obtaining their civil rights and freedom. Britain, consequently, expected that her Protestant subjects were similarly treated in a Catholic Country as ours.

On their occupation of Malta, the number of the English people in the Island was very scanty, and consequently there could arise no religious problem for the time being. But in course of time this number went on increasing. From the Census of 1829, we make out that on a population of approximately 119,000, there were 360 Jews, 72 Mohammedans, and about 4,500 Englishmen (Government officers, merchants, industrialists and soldiers).³ The latter were of different denominations, but presumably very few were Catholics. Hence we might reckon that well over 4,000 Protestants inhabited Malta at that time. With the increase of the English people in the Island, had its origin the question of Protestant propaganda and proselytism.

One of the first and foremost factors of Protestant propaganda and proselytism in our Island was the publication and the distribution of unauthorized bibles among the Maltese. Since some years, but mostly in the year 1809, the Bible Society of London suove to establish itself in Malta, and for this purpose it sent many boxes full of bibles in the Italian language to be distributed in the Island. This activity, however, was soon frustrated, because some of the bibles distributed in Valletta reached the local priests, who energetically fought this kind of Protestant propaganda and banned the reading of these bibles by the Catholics. This opposition kept in check for some years the activity of the Protestant Missionaries. But in 1814, after the end of the plague, the Biblical Sectarians tried to infect the Island with their doctrines. For a second time they started spreading similar biblical versions, this time in greater

¹ *Melita Theologica*, Vol. XI (1959), pp. 45-50.

² By the Emancipation Act of 1829.

³ Miège, *Histoire de Malte*, pp. 160-1.

quantities. They rented a house at Valletta, where to hold their religious gatherings, and they even translated St. John's Gospel in vernacular and published advertisements of their congregations in the public paper,⁴ styling themselves the 'Biblical Society of Malta'.

Archbishop Ferdinando Mattei (1808-29), as in duty bound, immediately protested to the Governor against this proselytism, and asked him to expel the sectarians, who were openly conspiring against the Catholic Religion of the place. The Governor Thomas Maitland (1813-24) called the Ministers of the Society and prohibited them the use of their Printing Press, the name of the Society and any activity which could affect the Religion of Malta.⁵ With the help of the Governor, therefore, the Bishop succeeded in stemming this initial Protestant proselytism.

A year later, however, Lord Bathurst, the then Secretary of State, informed the Governor that according to a constitutional principle of the English Nation, everybody was to be reckoned free in his religious operations. Consequently, he could not comply with the Archbishop's wish to expel the Sectarians, he only prohibited them to bear the name of 'Bible Society of Malta' and substituted therefor another name, i.e. the 'Bible Society in Malta', and banned the distribution of the Maltese version of the Gospel of St. John.⁶ The Archbishop, with the aid of the local priests, as well as of the Governor himself, succeeded in gathering the Maltese versions, together with those in Italian and Greek, as well as other books containing dialogues and catechisms in favour of the Protestant Creed.⁷

Early in 1825, the Bible Society was again busy in its propaganda work in the Island. This caused the Bishop to send a Pro-memoria to the Holy Father, and to make representations to the British Government. In the meantime, the people ostensibly showed themselves contrary to the proselytizing system of the Protestant Missionaries. As a consequence, Lord Bathurst directed the attention of the Bible Society to the distribution of the Bible among the Roman Catholic Inhabitants, and directed them not to raise any inconvenient with a systematic attempt to make proselytes. He instructed the Governor Marquis Hastings (1814-26)

⁴When the English occupied Malta in 1800, there was only one Printing Press and this belonged to the Government. The censorship of writings was entrusted to the Government Chief Secretary and to the Superintendent of the Printing Press. By way of exception the American Missionary Society and a Society of English Independents were permitted to have and use their own Printing Press. A similar permit was granted later to the Church Missionary Society.

⁵Archiepiscopal Archives (A.A.)— 1826, pp. 615ss; 1827, p. 300: Bishop Mattei's Pro-memoria to the Holy See, 1825.

⁶Ibid, 1826, p. 645 — Deputy Governor to Card. Secretary of State, 30.v.1825.

⁷Ibid, Pro-memoria, l.c.

that the gratuitous distribution of the Bible to the ships and vessels was a measure against which the Bishop could not offer any reasonable objection and informed him that the Bible Society in London had assured him to cease the distribution among the Roman Catholic Inhabitants.⁸

Later, the Cardinal Secretary of State, Giulio della Somaglia, strongly remonstrated to the Deputy Governor, Sir Manley Power, against the gratuitous distribution and the sale of the Holy Bible in Malta adducing that the Bible without the necessary comments which serve to point out the true meaning of the several passages, could lead the readers to different conclusions and different interpretations, and thus destroy that uniformity of belief, which is the essential and peculiar characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church.⁹

In reply to this letter, the Deputy-Governor asserted that the man in whose hands were the reins of power in this Island would be failing from his duty and neglecting His Majesty's instructions, were he to deny any possible protection to the Inhabitants, who professed the Roman Catholic Religion. He reminded the Cardinal of what his predecessors had done against the Bible Society. He added that the Government did ban the printing of bibles not only in vernacular, but even in Italian, unless intended to be exported; and, if some tracts were being circulated in the Island, sure it was that they had been imported from abroad, and consequently the Government could not take steps, without destroying individual right.¹⁰ He assured the Cardinal that the Government as in the past, would, in the future, take steps as would be deemed necessary to preserve the Roman Catholic Religion against the attempts of any Society or class of persons. He finally asked the Cardinal Secretary to stress to the Holy Father the point 'that the steps which sometimes it was expedient to take about this subject, would never be such as to violate the forms and practice constantly observed under the British Domination'.¹¹ This correspondence was communicated by Power to Lord Bathurst on the 15th September 1825.¹²

In spite of all this, on the 11th of June 1825, the Joint Treasurers to the Bible Society established in Malta – William Jowett, Daniel Temple and Cleardo Naudi – asked the Lt. Governor, through his Chief Secretary Sir Fred. Hankey, the licence to open a shop in premises No. 277, Strada Reale, Valletta, for the business of the sale of the Scriptures,

⁸ Colonial Office (C.O.) 159/8: Lord Bathurst to Hastings, 4. v. 1825, p. 54.

⁹ Royal Malta Library (R.M.L.) – *Despatches* 1822-1825: Power to Bathurst: 15. vi. 1825, pp. 112-6.

¹⁰ Curiously enough the law of the time prohibited the printing of immoral and irreligious books or pamphlets; but it did not prohibit the importation thereof.

¹¹ A.A. – 1826, p. 645 – Power to Card. S. of S.: 30. v. 1825.

¹² R.M.L. – *Despatches* 1822-25: Power to Lord Bathurst: 15. vi. 1825, pp. 112-6.

sent by the British and Foreign Bible Society. The Chief Secretary was instructed to inform the petitioners that the licence applied for could not be granted, without giving them any reason for its withholding.¹³ Copies of the Joint Treasurers' petition and the Chief Secretary's respective reply were transmitted to the British Secretary of State, as enclosures in a letter wherein the Deputy Governor informed the latter that the Bishop could not be reconciled to the proceedings either of the Bible Society or of the Missionaries established in Malta. He would, however, continue, as thitherto, to listen to what the Bishop had to represent on the matter, and to comply with his suggestions as far as might be compatible with His Lordship the Secretary of State's instructions. In the same letter Power remarked that the Joint Treasurers did not say in what languages the books they proposed selling were published, and, since there was an understanding between the Government and the Ecclesiastical Authorities that no translation of the Scriptures in Maltese should come forth, he could avail himself of this agreement to refuse the licence applied for.¹⁴

One of the signatories of the application was, as we have said, a certain Cleardo Naudi -- dubbed by Sir Manley 'a venal character, who had formerly been a Roman Catholic'. This fact considerably heightened the idea of the Maltese population that a desire prevailed on the part of the British Government to convert the Catholics to Protestantism. Sir Manley consequently stressed the point that no such idea should exist among the people for the peace and the tranquillity of the Island, 'because -- he said -- the Maltese had shown themselves the most peaceable people in the World on all occasions, since they came under the British Crown, as a consequence of Britain's non-interference with their Religion and of Her toleration of their habits on this subject, and they had only shown symptoms for a disposition to attack some of the Missionaries who a short time before tried to make converts in the Island'. The Deputy Governor revealed his doubts as to whether the Secretary of State, after his interview with the Bible Society in London, would expect an application from them to take 'such a decided step in a Catholic Country where the heads of the Church are violently hostile to the sale of the Bible altogether, and where the people are extremely bigoted in their Religion'.¹⁵

On the same day he transmitted this letter, the Joint Treasurers addressed another petition to Hankey, expressing their concern to find their request not granted and pointed out that the taking of that shop was a

¹³ Ibid. pp. 118-20.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 112.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 112.

measure adopted in consequence of an express recommendation, more than a year before, by the British and Foreign Bible Society, 'whose privilege it has been, in a manner most honourable to Great Britain and most gratifying to every Christian mind to impart the knowledge of the Word of God to almost every Nation under Heaven'. They added that, by withholding the licence, the progressive usefulness of the Society, instead of being confirmed, would become essentially impeded and restricted. Hence they begged a new consideration of their petition.¹⁵ To which Hankey replied that he was far from wishing to throw impediments in the progressive usefulness of the Society, yet he did not deem it fitting to order the issue of the licence.¹⁷ Both petition and answer were transmitted by the Chief Secretary to Robert Wilmot Horton, the Under-Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, on the 18th of June, 1825.¹⁸

On the 7th of September, the Secretary of State, answering Power's letter, wrote that he could not admit the prohibition; but, at the same time, he instructed him to issue a licence permitting the Society to sell bibles *at their own Establishment with as little display as possible, and with as much tenderness as could be shown to the feelings of the Roman Catholic Inhabitants.*¹⁹

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¹⁵ Ibid. p. 165.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 167.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 163.

¹⁹ C.O. 159/8, pp. 99, 101 — Bathurst to Power: 7.ix.1825.