Introduction: Britain and Italy, Religion and Politics

Those who seek an explanation for the scant attachment of Italians to Italy and to a proud and civil cohabitation, usually trot out some historical events. The absence of the Reformation, for example. Our having remained a Catholic country, host of the Vatican and of the Pope, and Catholic in the laziest and most egoistic way: of that Catholicism made of indulgences and...remissions, which neglects the concreteness of rules and conduct. Everything that Protestant religions have taught other countries in terms of rectitude, severity, role of the community – here we haven’t seen it. We have loved our Lord very much and our neighbour only a little, we have said many Hail Marys, and we have replaced the community with the family, and with the whole system of dispensations and contradictions that comes with it, to the extent that ‘la famiglia’ has become the model of criminal organisations which fight against the State, the primary community.1

This book examines Anglo-Italian political and cultural relations from the proclamation of Italy as a unitary and independent state up to the seizure of Rome and the end of the Pope’s temporal power. It analyses the importance and impact of religion, religious sentiments, and religious propaganda in shaping British views of and interactions with Italy. The anti-Papal beliefs of most of the ruling class of Victorian Britain, and the anti-Catholicism of some parts of it, are already well known. However, by looking at high politics and popular culture at the same time, this book attempts to examine the British participation in the making of the new Italy in an original manner. In particular, it focuses on the attempts of a number of British Bible societies and Protestant associations to convert Italy to Protestantism, and on Italian reactions,
at the popular level as well as those of the Papacy and the clergy. It puts
religion at the centre of a complex political and cultural war that was
fought on many different levels and had important implications for
global, international, and domestic dimensions: global because of the
termination of the Pope’s temporal power; international because of the
birth of the Kingdom of Italy, which redesigned the political map of
Europe; and domestic (for the United Kingdom) because of the Irish
question and the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in England
(and later in Scotland). It highlights how nationalism and Ultramontane
Catholicism, two of the most lasting responses to the French Revolution,
clashed violently and repeatedly over the issue of Italian unification and
the annexation of Rome to the Kingdom of Italy.² This book, therefore,
aims to examine the interplay between ideology and foreign policy in
modern Europe, and to contribute to the increasing body of research
on the relationship between religion and politics. It seeks to enhance
our knowledge of the limits of Britain’s understanding of Italy and of
British attitudes towards empire and nationality, and it emphasises the
transnational dimension of the Italian Risorgimento.

Considering the multifarious relations that Italy had with Britain
during the Risorgimento and up to 1870 (and beyond), it has been
important to give this book as much of an interdisciplinary outlook as
possible, combining modern history with the study of political culture,
the history of ideas with an examination of themes of transnational
religious history, and research on cultural imperialism with compara-
tive diplomatic studies. It is in fact evident, in my perception of the
Risorgimento, that we need to pay due attention to its political, reli-
gious, and transnational aspects.³ By the last of these, I mean ‘the
multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the
borders of nation states’. In the present book the palm of transnational-
ism will go to British Protestant missionaries, who operated not only as
religious agents, but also as cultural, political, and even, at times, com-
mercial mediators.⁴ They were certainly effective as cultural agents, for
the accounts and representations of Italy and the Italians that they sent
home contributed to forming the British understanding of the Italian
peninsula. Therefore, those who seek an explanation for how and why
the perceived backwardness of Italy has been narrated, over the last 150
years, using anti-Papal, anticlerical, and anti-Catholic tropes, will hope-
fully find some clues in the chapters that follow. Luca Sofri is certainly
not the first, and will not be the last, to point to the frequent proffering
of Hail Marys, together with the tendency to forget the commandment
‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’, as one of the primary (and