

## Spiritual Alphabets in Italy, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century

### *Alfabets espirituals a Itàlia, segles XVI-XVII*

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#### RESUM

Segons la definició de la primera edició del *Vocabolario della Crusca* (1691), “alfabet” és el ‘nom que es dóna a la col·lecció d’elements de les llengües, així anomenat pels dos primers caràcters de l’alfabet grec’. Fins i tot en l’era moderna, per tant, les qualitats que caracteritzen l’alfabet són l’essencialitat de la informació i l’ordre de presentació. A partir de l’últim quart del segle XVI, tanmateix, “Alfabet” es va convertir en un títol freqüent per als manuals religiosos i morals postreidintins. Es van publicar alfabet per a la confessió, alfabet d’exemples, alfabet per a la pregària i la predicació, etc. Es va mantenir la pressuposició d’una riquesa d’informació essencial que s’havia d’administrar al lector en un ordre específic, però va canviar el camp doctrinal de referència (ortodox i antierasmià) i les expectatives respecte a la responsabilitat i l’autonomia del lector cristia. Aquesta presentació pretén oferir un primer examen del contingut i l’estil de les publicacions més exemplars d’aquestes des d’una perspectiva diacrònica.

**PARAULES CLAU:** Contrarreforma, educació religiosa, educació moral, alfabetització a la Itàlia moderna primerenca.

## RESUMEN

Según la definición de la primera edición del *Vocabolario della Crusca* (1691), «alfabeto» es el ‘nombre dado al conjunto de elementos de las lenguas, llamado así por las dos primeras letras del alfabeto griego’. Por lo tanto, incluso en la era moderna, las cualidades que caracterizan al alfabeto son la esencialidad de la información y el orden de presentación.

A partir del último cuarto del siglo xvi, sin embargo, «Alfabeto» se convirtió en un título frecuente para los manuales religiosos y morales posttridentinos. Se publicaron alfabetos para la confesión, alfabetos de ejemplos, alfabetos para la oración y la predicación, etc. Se mantuvo la idea de que había una gran cantidad de información esencial que debía administrarse al lector en un orden específico, pero cambiaron el campo doctrinal de referencia (ortodoxo y anti-erasmiano) y las expectativas respecto a la responsabilidad y la autonomía del lector cristiano. Esta presentación tiene como objetivo ofrecer un examen inicial del contenido y el estilo de las publicaciones más exemplares desde una perspectiva diacrónica.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Contrarreforma, educación religiosa, educación moral, alfabetización en la Italia moderna temprana.

## ABSTRACT

According to the definition in the first edition of the *Vocabolario della Crusca* (1691), “alphabet” is the “name given to the collection of elements of languages, so called because of the first two letters of the Greek alphabet.” Even in the early modern age, therefore, the qualities that characterize the alphabet are the essentiality of information and the order of presentation.

Starting in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, however, “Alphabet” became a frequent title for post-Tridentine religious and moral manuals. Alphabets for confession, alphabets of examples, alphabets for prayer and preaching, etc. were published. The assumption of a wealth of essential information to be administered to the reader in a specific order remained, but the doctrinal field of reference (orthodox and anti-Erasmian) and the expectations regarding the responsibility and autonomy of the Christian reader changed. This presentation aims to offer an initial examination of the content and style of the most exemplary of these publications from a diachronic perspective.

**KEYWORDS:** Counter-Reformation, religious education, moral education, literacy in early modern Italy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Alphabets had never been merely writing systems. Since antiquity, people considered their signs as symbols and associated them with deeper meanings, related from time to time to visible things, such as nature, or more abstract phenomena, like religion and magic. Thus, an alphabet was generally perceived as something more than a tool to communicate or to memorize information. In the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean world, letters were imbued with esoteric and numerological meanings. How they were ordered in the alphabet, their sequence, was believed to mirror the harmony of nature, the cosmic functioning and the will of the divine force that created all that—suffice it to think of Semitic mysticism and the role of the Jewish alphabet in the Kabbalah.

But ancient Greeks also saw in their alphabet some kind of representation of the cosmic order, to the point that the alphabet played a meaningful part in their *paideia*, understood as both a philosophy of education and an educational practice. In the learning process of the human being, learning the alphabet was a symbolic training in itself, as it represented a gradual ascent from total ignorance to the most subtle forms of understanding, and enabled the learner to make order in the microcosm of their mind. On this basis, the Greek *paideia* developed for the alphabet a pedagogical and ethical value that was carried over into its Roman version. Young Romans learned the alphabet's signs, the letters, to acquire a skill, but also to become fully part of a culture, in a word, to become Roman citizens. In a sense, *litterae* offered the foundation for both speech and virtue.

Christianity kept the symbolic value of the alphabet adjusted by classical *paideia*, but also retrieved its mystical value. Since it allowed man to know and tell of the Creation, the alphabet was seen as a tool to better know his Creator, and also as an instrument of spiritual meditation, both in the Byzantine and Western traditions.<sup>1</sup> It is precisely in the Middle Ages that one can find the first examples of “spiritual alphabets,” which were actually known as “monastic alphabets”: they included religious and moral contents (hagiographies, prayers, precepts etc.) and were divided into chapters, or pages, or paragraphs, or verses etc., and alphabetically ordered so as to facilitate monks in memorizing their sequence. Learning and repeating a monastic alphabet entailed training

<sup>1</sup> Rosa Maria Parrinello, “Gli alfabeti spirituali tra mediazione mistica e storia comparata delle religioni,” *Humanitas*, no. 65 (2010), 810-830.

memory, devotion and contemplation at once. In Western countries, these Latin texts were also known as “Christian *abecedaria*” (It. *abecedari cristiani*). Among the most illustrious examples are Thomas à Kempis’s *Alphabetum parvum monachi in schola Christi* and Pseudo-Saint Bonaventure’s *Alphabetum religiosorum incipientium* (15th century).<sup>2</sup> Both works used the alphabet as a structure to display their mystical, religious content and help the reader to gradually embrace the interior discipline their authors proposed, and to get used to a method made of order and repetition.

Christian alphabets were later inherited by the authors of the *devotio moderna*, a spiritual movement that originated in the mid-15th century in Germany and the Low Countries and emphasized interiority, simplicity, and personal prayer. Once again, the alphabetical order was considered perfect to convey the concepts of essentiality and accessibility, yet it allowed the transmission of some theological content to a broader audience while it maintained a semblance of humility and directness.

Spiritual alphabets underwent a significant transformation after the early 16th century, as the religious upheaval triggered a dramatic debate around the religious literature written in the vernacular languages. During the Renaissance, Spiritual Alphabets were composed in Italian, Spanish, or French, as if to signal a democratization of religious discourse and a redefinition of the alphabet’s role from monastic exercise to instrument of lay instruction and devotion.

A turning point was marked by the Spanish mystics. Franciscan friar Francisco de Osuna’s *Abecedario spiritual* (1527) was the most influential in the orthodox milieu; it comprised 22 treatises on prayer and meditation, each one beginning with a letter of the alphabet. *Alphabeto christiano* by Juan de Valdés (1545), a spiritual dialogue with no real alphabetical list, was promptly enrolled in the *Index librorum prohibitorum* of the Roman Inquisition. Then, after the Council of Trent, the Church encouraged new forms of popular literature to instruct illiterate people in morals and religion. *Alphabets* and *abecedaria* returned, but instead of fostering individual growth and meditation they aimed to fix devotional practices, often in groups (i.e. Marian prayers such as *corone* or *sabati virginali*), and control every aspect of people’s interior life. At the same time, in popular culture, from the alphabetic format stemmed

<sup>2</sup> Laura Vangone, “L’«Alphabetum religiosorum incipientium» («Ama paupertatem»). F. Santi (Ed.), Lo Pseudo-Bonaventura. Studi, edizioni e repertorio (Sismel, 2024), 3-28.

other didactic genres not necessarily religious, such as collections of proverbs and other collections based on practical wisdom.

My research focuses on a selection of spiritual alphabets chosen among those published in Italy during the Counter-Reformation, which I consider to start around 1540 with the establishment of the Roman Inquisition, through the 17th century.<sup>3</sup> I will analyze the aims of the authors as they emerge in their prefaces and dedications, describe the alphabetical structure and provide some quotations from the books both in original Italian and English translation.

## 2. JUAN DE VALDÉS AND THE CHRISTIAN ALPHABET (1545)

The Spanish courtier and mystic Juan de Valdés wrote the *Christian Alphabet* in 1536, but it was published only in 1545, after his death, without indication of the author's name.<sup>4</sup> The spirit of this work flourished in the Italian milieu that, in the 1530s, had sympathy for some principles of the Lutheran Reformation and did not want Rome to finally break with the German Protestants. Those groups included different schools of thought and were called *Spirituali*. Valdés was perhaps their most charismatic leader<sup>5</sup>.

After having left Spain in 1530 to escape allegations of heresy, Juan de Valdés settled down in Naples, where he gathered a circle that had a twofold purpose. First, it had cultural aspirations, as it was attended by the Spanish and Italian élite supporting the Italian politics of Emperor Charles V, who aimed to introduce the Spanish language at least in the southern regions of the peninsula. But it also had a religious goal, which came in part from the same Habsburg politics that hoped for a compromise between the Roman Church and the Protestants, and in part from Valdés's personal religious creed, boosted by his charismatic *persona*. At the beginning, while he still lived in Spain, Valdés had merged the mysticism of the *alumbrados* with Erasmus of Rotterdam's mild reformism in his first printed work, *The Dialogue of Christian Doctrine* (1529),<sup>6</sup> and this activated the Spanish Inquisition against

<sup>3</sup> Conventionally, the Counterreformation period ends in 1648. But it is well established that, in Italy, post-tridentine Catholicism lived off well beyond the end of the 17th century.

<sup>4</sup> *Alphabeto christiano, Che insegna la vera via d'acquistare il lume dello Spirito santo* (Nicolò Bascarini: Venice, 1545).

<sup>5</sup> Massimo Firpo, Juan de Valdés e la riforma nell'Italia del Cinquecento (Laterza, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> The *Diálogo de doctrina christiana* was the only printed book while Valdés was still living.

him. Once in Italy, his doctrines grew more radical. They included some principles very close to Protestant theories, such as the devaluation of rituals, the necessity for worshippers to read the Gospel directly, the pointlessness of ecclesiastical intermediation. But some other principles were far too extreme even for the Protestant churches, as they saw religious practice as something totally individual, so much that anything concerning devotion and the relation with the divinity could happen inside oneself, with no need to involve any other person and, above all, any other institution; publicly, one could even pretend to abide by the official religious practice, because God would know the truth and this was all that mattered.

Valdés wrote the *Christian Alphabet* in Spanish, as well as his entire works, since Naples, at that time, was a Spanish-speaking city. The dialogue's ideal audience were the members of the Valdesian circle, aristocrats and clerics, often close to the Roman Curia. Thus, for the publication, it was translated into Italian by humanist Marcantonio Magno. It is a spiritual guide in the form of a dialogue, the most pedagogical among the ancient literary genres, tracing back to Plato's works. And it features two interlocutors, Valdés himself as the Master and Marchioness Giulia Gonzaga as his disciple. Lady Gonzaga was one of Valdés's earliest acolytes and a sort of patroness to him, so that she could well act as Valdés's sparring partner.

Here the prologue of the text with its *manifesto*:

I just want two things from you [...] the one, that you never give either trust or loyalty to what you are going to read here more than you will deem and judge it based on the holy Scripture, and aimed to the perfect Christian charity, which is the sign Christ wants to denote and distinguish his Christians among all the people in the world. The other, that you use this dialogue *as well as children when they learn the Latin language, so to consider it as a Christian Alphabet, through which one learns the principles of the Christian perfection*, assuming that, after having learnt them, you shall abandon the alphabet and apply your mind to bigger things, more excellent and more divine.

[Voglio solamente due cose [...] L'una è che non dia più fede né più credito a ciò che qui leggerà di quanto le parerà & giudicherà che sia fondato nella sacra scrittura, et che sia inviato e dirizzato alla perfetta charità christiana, che è il segno nel quale Christo vuole che i suoi christiani tra tutte le persone del mondo siano conosciuti & differentiati. L'altra è che di questo Dialogo si serva, come si servono della grammatica i fanciulli che imparano la lingua latina, in maniera

che lo pigli come uno Alphabeto Christiano, nel quale si imparano i principij della perfettione christiana, facendo istima che imparati questi ha da lasciare l'alphabeto & applicare l'animo suo a cose maggiori, più eccellenti & più divine.]<sup>7</sup>

According to Valdés, believers could learn true Christianity through a process that started from the simplest notion to gradually ascend to the highest and most abstract concepts. He explained that to Giulia by associating the topic of the alphabet to the Latin language, as he himself must have experienced as a young student (Valdés had studied at the prestigious University of Alcalá de Henares). So, in this *Alphabet*, there is no content alphabetically listed; rather, Christian religion is deconstructed into elements concerning its essence—man as image of God; what is happiness; why men were born; what is original sin; what is baptism; what is the point of preaching the Gospel; what is the difference between the Ten Commandments and the Gospel etc.—and the believers' requirements—to respect the worldly hierarchy, avoid hate and revenge, eradicate lust, be sober and generous, control passions, get to know the world, get to know oneself etc. All this and much more is expounded in simple, plain Italian, made lively by the question-answer dynamic, which tried to depict a realistic scene, with some success. Even though the book's audience was supposed to be well-learned, nevertheless the style of the writing is sober and void of literary pretensions, consistent with the purpose of the translator:

Since I read the Dialogue in Castilian language entitled *Alphabeto Christiano* [...] I decided, to better resolve me to join the way of Christ, to turn it into our Italian language the most clearly that I could and I did not care any advice to use the Tuscan language, as far as it was understandable.

[Hauendo letto il Dialogo in lingua Castigliana c'ha il titolo d'*Alphabeto Christiano* [...] mi è parso, per più accendermi a seguire il uero camino di Christo ch'egli ci insegna, riducerlo in lingua nostra Italiana quanto più chiaramente ho saputo, non curando (pur che sia inteso) d'atre osseruationi di parlar Thoscano.]<sup>8</sup>

Right before the Roman Church began to take the steps that led to the Council of Trent and its decrees, opening the century-long season of the Counter-Reformation, Valdés's *Christian Alphabet* suggested to his readers

<sup>7</sup> Valdés, *Aplhabeto christiano* (Anicia, 2018), 136.

<sup>8</sup> Juan de Valdés, *Alphabeto christiano* (London: 1861), p. 133.

that the Christian path was a serious endeavor requiring, for sure, strength and commitment, and yet, with the proper training, it could be walked alone, free from surveillance and confident in one's capacity to "feel" the divinity.

### 3. SPIRITUAL ALPHABETS AND THE MANNERISM

The idea of the alphabet as exhibited by Valdés was destined to fade, because the Council of Trent (1545-1564) deemed its foundations dangerous for Catholic orthodoxy: common believers should not be put directly into contact with Holy Scripture, nor should they pursue deeper contents and interpretation. Above all, they should not gain any kind of independence in matters of religion, least of all to believe that some kind of direct conversation could happen between them and the Holy Spirit.

As spiritual alphabets returned in the post-Tridentine years, they merged together the original pattern of the Latin "*abecedario*," suitable for memorization, with the moral character of the Counter-Reformation and the literary taste of the time, which was not exactly user-friendly. The fundamental feature of the simple style, essential to Valdés and the reformed *Spirituali*, was no longer welcome. Exhortations to allegedly independent behavior were rather replaced with a bulk of precepts that did not require any autonomous action.

A paradigmatic book of this kind was the *Confessional Alphabet (Alfabeto Confessionale)*.<sup>9</sup> It was a guide to observing the sacrament of confession, a practice strongly encouraged by the Tridentine decrees.<sup>10</sup> Authored by Lateran Canon Serafino Salsi (d. 1590), it was published in Pesaro in 1576<sup>11</sup>. As was customary in early modern books, Salsi prepended two prefaces to the actual treatise, the first a sort of conventional dedication to the Bishop of Ripatransone that, in this case, becomes a sort of patron of the author. The

<sup>9</sup> Alfabeto confessionale composto et dichiarato, da don Serafino Salsi di Rimino Canonico Regolare Lateranense. Nel quale si contengono brevissimamente tutte le principali conditioni della sacramentale confessione, & un modo utilissimo per potersi ben confessare, oltre la dichiaratione di molti luochi della Scrittura Sacra, & Theologia detta Scolastica (Pesaro: Girolamo Concordia, 1576).

<sup>10</sup> Also a practice that certified the successes of the Council of Trent. See Giovanni Romeo, "Confessione dei peccati e confessori nell'Italia della Controriforma: cosa dire del Seicento?", *Studi storici*, no. 4 (2010), 967-1002. DOI: 10.7375/70281.

<sup>11</sup> Celso Rosini, *Lycey Lateranensis illustrum scriptorum sacri apostolici ordinis clericorum canonico-rum regularium Salvatoris Lateranensis elogia* (Neri, 1649), vol. 2, liber XVI, 259-61.

second preface is addressed to the readers and explains the purpose of the work:

Since I long so much for your salvation, I composed the Confessional Alphabet, as you know, in blank verse, according to the order of the letters, so that you can learn by heart more easily the requirements for the confession, which, even though they are not all necessary in the same way, none of them is superfluous, I believe [...] is my aim teaching to you, my dearest people, how good and profitably you can confess.

[Io dunque desideroso assai della vostra salute, composi l'Alfabeto confessionale, come sapete, in verso sciolto, per ordine delle lettere, acciò più agevolmente poteste ritenere a memoria le condizioni della confessione, le quali quantunque non tutte siano necessarie, non credo però, che alcuna ve ne sia di soverchia [...] È il mio intento, d'insegnare a voi miei dilettissimi come bene, & fruttuosamente confessar vi possiate.]<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the *Confessional Alphabet* was a tool for lay believers, to help them save their souls through the sacrament of penance. And after his prefaces, Salsi listed twenty requirements for confession (“condizioni della confessione”), each one condensed in a sentence, or motto, each one beginning with a different letter of the Roman alphabet. Such as:

- A. Accusi sé, non altri, e sé non scusi.  
[The penitent shall blame himself, not someone else, and shall not justify himself]
- B. Breve sia, chiara, senza involgi, o fole.  
[The confession shall be short, clear, without either redundancy or gossip]
- C. Costante, e senza alcun timor, ch'atterri.  
[The penitent shall confess regularly and without fear]
- D. Dolorosa, l'inferno, e'l Ciel rimiri.  
[The penitent shall feel sorrow and think to hell and heaven]

<sup>12</sup> Salsi, Alfabeto confessionale, XI.

E. Sponga con sua lingua gli error suoi.

[The penitent shall expose his sins in his own words]<sup>13</sup>

These mottos count eleven syllables each, so they are hendecasyllabic verses, the most common metrical form of Italian poetry in the early modern period, also used for narrative and religious poetry. This additionally assisted the reader in learning them by heart.

After the list, Salsi explained the requirements extensively, in prose, devoting 3 to 4 pages to each one and always following the same pattern, a two-part reasoning: at first, he briefly and simply expounds the motto's content; then he offers a repertoire of quotations related to the topic and drawn from the most illustrious sources such as the Gospel, the Apostles, the Church Fathers, etc., both in Latin and Italian. This makes me think that Salsi envisaged for his book several levels of interpretation—from popular wisdom to basic theology—and several typologies of readers. Actually, even though Salsi's preface is clear in stating that he wrote his book for the worshippers, it comes to mind that it could also have served parish priests in instructing their less literate flock, or even to find suggestions and examples for preaching.

A contemporary of Serafino Salsi, Dominican father Vincenzo Ferrini (1534-1595) published his *Exemplar Alphabet* (*Alfabeto esemplare*) in 1586.<sup>14</sup> As was not uncommon for a Dominican, Ferrini worked for the Roman Inquisition, which was particularly committed to moral surveillance during the post-Tridentine decades.<sup>15</sup> In this case, the book is a wide repertoire of examples (“*exempla*”), organized around themes alphabetically ordered, numbered 1 to 1523, and written in the form of similitudes (“*simili*,” Ferrini calls them):

Letter “C” - Chiesa [Church]

228. The Church, like physicians.

As well as wise physicians adjust drugs according to the season.

Holy Church reads diverse Scriptures according to the time and celebrations, so to benefit us the most.

<sup>13</sup> Salsi, *Alfabeto confessionale*, s.n.

<sup>14</sup> Primo alfabeto esemplare, del R. P. F. Vincentio Ferrini da Casteluovo di Garfagnana, Predicatore Domenicano, & Vicario Generale del Santo Ufficio in Parma. Ad ogni stato di persona utile: ma a Predicatori, Oratori, & Poeti necessario (Parma: Viotti, 1583).

<sup>15</sup> In 1584 Ferrini was sent to rule the domenicano convents in Hungary, Stiria and Carinzia: Luca Ceriotti, Federica Dallasta, L’Inquisizione a Parma negli anni dei Farnese (FrancoAngeli, 2008), 53.

[Chiesa, a' medici]

[Come i medici prudenti vanno secondo le stagioni temperando i medicamenti. Così la santa Chiesa secondo I tempi, & secondo imisteri celebrati, recita diverse scritture, atte a giovarci vivamente.]<sup>16</sup>

233. The Church, like the bride.

As well as the bride can't get enough to admire the wounds that his groom endured to defend her honor. Merciful Church can't get enough to meditate and admire the passion torments that Christ endured for her salvation and glory.

[Chiesa, alla sposa.]

[Come la sposa piena di compassione non si satia mai di mirare le ferrite, che per difesa dell'honor di lei ha ricevuto il suo sposo. Così la chiesa compassionevole non si satia mai di ragionare, & contemplare la passione, & i tormenti, che per sua salute, & honore ha patito il suo sposo Christo.]<sup>17</sup>

Ferrini declares in his preface a purpose opposite to Salsi's, stating that he writes primarily for preachers, orators and poets, and secondarily for commoners:

nevertheless my first intention have been, to relief preachers, orators and poets from the great effort they often do when they search for the similar, appropriate for different situations, be it for either the need to be clear, or the beauty of their sermons, or poems. Other less clever should appreciate my work, because, in reading it, they will learn something more than an example: they will discover a moral document, helpful in leading them oh the path of a good life.

[nondimeno la prima intention mia è stata per levar molta fatica a' Predicatori, Oratori, & Poeti, che spesso fanno in cercar simili, a diversi propositi convenienti, sì per chiarezza, sì anco per bellezza de' loro sermoni, overo delle compositioni loro. Agli altri ancora meno intelligenti doverà questa mia fatica esser grata, perché leggendola, oltra che in ciascuno simile impareranno, o un secreto di natura, o di sacra scrittura: scopriranno ancora un documento morale, atto ad incaminar loro nella strada del ben vivere.]<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ferrini, *Primo alfabeto esemplare*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Ferrini, *Primo alfabeto esemplare*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Ferrini, *Primo alfabeto esemplare*, s.n.

In the first place, this Alphabet is a storage of subjects for homilies, moral discourses and literary writings; in making them available “ready-to-wear,” Ferrini ensures that orators and writers convey the appropriate moral message with the due Catholic shade. This kind of repertoire comes from the Latin collections of *sententiae et exempla*, which were often presented in alphabetic order;<sup>19</sup> they had more or less the same purpose, to serve as a repository and inspiration for writers, or preachers, or for rhetoric studies and exercises.<sup>20</sup> Anyway, Ferrini told his audience that even less educated people could profit from his book just by reading it, as it contained a lot of short tales with a moral lesson easy to consult and, differently from Salsi, with no Latin texts. Interestingly, then, at the end of the book we find two Tables of Contents, one Index for the first terms of the similitudes, and one Index for the second terms. As it was printed five times over 30 years, we must infer that Ferrini’s *Exemplar Alphabet* enjoyed considerable success, probably thanks to the versatility of the exempla-genre that broadened the prospective audience.

#### 4. SPIRITUAL ALPHABETS AND THE BAROQUE

I continue this quick overview of the evolution of spiritual alphabets in the early modern period with the work of a rather controversial religious, Bartolomeo Cambi (1558-1617).<sup>21</sup>

The *Alphabet of the Divine Love* (*Alfabeto del divino amore*)<sup>22</sup> is a collection of poems inspired by the mutual love between God and human beings. As a

<sup>19</sup> Such as André Rodriguez Eborense, *Sententiae et exempla ex probatissimis quibusque scriptoribus collecta, & per locos communes digesta* (Lyon: Paganum, 1557); or, for the Protestant regions, Christoph Obenheims *Proutuarium sacrosanctum, tam virtutum quam vitiorum exempla continens [...]* ordineque *Alphabeticu digestum* (Oberursel: Heinrich, 1576).

<sup>20</sup> Erasmus himself conceived the *Adagia* as a tool to teach rhetoric.

<sup>21</sup> Adriano Prosperi, “Bartolomeo Cambi,” *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 17, 1974, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bartolomeo-cambi\\_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bartolomeo-cambi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/). Cambi was also known as Bartolomeo da Salutio. In 1575 he entered in the Franciscan Order, but in 1598 he moved into a Reformed convent, in search of a more stern and ascetic discipline. He was a theologian and a popular and controversial preacher, hugely aggressive against the Jews. His talent to inflame the crowds concerned the authorities both civic and ecclesiastical, as they detected in him some reminiscence of Girolamo Savonarola; at a certain point he was forbidden to preach and retired in convent, where focused completely on writing.

<sup>22</sup> *Alfabeto del divino amore*, composto d’amorosissimi Canti Spirituali, cantato in eccessi mentali, & amorose elevationi a dio, dal R. P. F. Bartolomeo da Saluthio, de’ Minori Osservanti Riformati. Con gli Argomenti a ciascun Canto per maggior chiarezza, e consolatione de’ divoti di Giesu Christo, Dio, e Sig. nostro (Barezzo Baretti, 1609).

theological topic, “divine love” had already existed in the 5th century B.C. and was recurrent throughout the Middle Ages. But starting from the 14th century it entered more often into European mystic literature and devotional practice, generally in contexts that searched for a more intimate, more sincere and simple religiousness,<sup>23</sup> such as the *devotio moderna* in Germany and the Low Countries. Apparently, this made the spiritual alphabet an ideal form to convey the meanings of divine love. Divine love (*divinus amor*) was also related to spiritual enlightenment, a concept that, in the 16th century, recalled for the Roman Church several heretical schools of thought, from Lutheranism to the Spanish *alumbrados*. Hence we could perhaps explain, in part, why a Society of the Divine Love (*Compagnia del Divino Amore*), composed of both clerics and laymen, was active in Rome in 1511-1527, but then died out and was restored only in 1655.

Bartolomeo Cambi could never be confused with a Protestant, but no doubt his preaching focused on the need for a renewal of personal devotion, while the mystical level of his writings reached the highest peaks. In this volume, the preface “To the Reader” is written by Giorgio da Fiano, a minor friar and the editor of several works by Bartolomeo; so, it does not report the author’s voice but it well depicts an essential feature of his writing, namely the zeal of his faith:

This burning and spiritual composition (pious reader) [...] From it, you will see exploding and darting hundreds, thousands of rays of wisdom and love, to enlighten your mind and enflame your heart. Then you will not disdain to read and ruminare these sententious verses, inspired at first from the gentle breath of the Holy Spirit, and later said and sung through the mouth of the zealous servant in Christ brother Bartolomeo from Salutio, minor observant friar.

[Questa infiammata, & spirituale compositione (Divoto Lettore)[...] da lei a guisa d’una machina di fuoco vedrai scoppiare, & folgorare ben cento, & mille raggi, & di sapienza, & d’amore per illuminarti la mente, & infiammarti l’affetto. Non ti sdegnerei adunque di leggere, & ruminare questi sententiosi versi, prima spirati dall’Aura soave dello Spirito Santo, & doppo proferiti, & cantati dalla bocca dell’infervorato

<sup>23</sup> Federico Corrubolo, “Il Divino amore dalla mistica teologia del sec. XIV alla pietà romana del Settecento,” in *Le vestigia dei gesuati. L’eredità culturale del Colombini e dei suoi seguaci*, ed. Isabella Gagliardi (Firenze University Press, 2020), 135-58.

servo di Christo F. BARTOLOMEO Minor Osservante Riformato da SALUTHIO.]<sup>24</sup>

On the subject of divine love, Cambi also wrote theological treatises and moral essays, and other collections of poems. However, the *Alphabet* represented a change of pace in religious poetry toward the baroque taste, with hundreds of poems that endlessly rework the main theme of divine love and a few sub-themes, patterned closely on profane love poetry. Actually, the sub-themes echo the archetypal love patterns of Petrarchan poetry, while lexicon and rhetorical figures are exquisitely baroque.

Subject:

[The Author] lovingly jokes with Saint Love,  
and beg him to unveil his charming face.

Love, why do you hold me?  
Why do you restrain me?  
Why do you tie me up?  
And why don't you unfold  
To me, just once your pretty face,  
Where Heaven is enshrined?

[Argomento:

Scherza amorosamente col Santo Amore,  
e lo prega che gli mostri una volta il suo bel volto.]

[Amor, perché mi tieni?

Perché più mi tratiene?

Perché mi leghi?

E perché non mi spieghi

Una volta il bel volto,

Dove lo Paradiso sta raccolto?]<sup>25</sup>

Beyond the mention of ties and bonds, the verses above could easily refer to the pagan god of love, Cupid, promptly reminding a barely learned 17th-century reader of the fable of Psyche and Cupid and Cupid's attempts to hide his face from his lover. Here, of course, Paradise is no metaphor for some worldly, forbidden joy but is the real Heaven. In this way, Cambi's reader

<sup>24</sup> Cambi, *Alfabeto del divino amore*, s.n.

<sup>25</sup> Cambi, *Alfabeto del divino amore*, c. 17v.

constantly oscillates between the semantic field of profane love and that of sacred love.

Cambi's *Alphabet* encompasses all the poetic forms of that time: sonnets, *laude*, *madrigali*, *canzoni*, *canzonette* are arranged alphabetically according to the initial letter of their first verse, and sometimes introduced by a short prologue. In this sense, the alphabetical criterion has no use for memory; it is a choice like any other, an ingenious game. Here is an example from the letter T-section:

Tiemmi pur' quanto vuoi,  
 Obedir' bramo solo a i cenni tuoi,  
 Non è già che m'annoii,  
 Il tuo cantare,  
 Anzi ti vo' pregare,  
 Che nn voglia cessare  
 Tu di versare  
 Sopra di me concetti,  
 Che obedir bramo solo a i tuoi precetti.

[Keep me as long as you want to,  
 I crave to obey to your orders,  
 Your songs  
 They do not bore me,  
 Please,  
 Do not stop  
 To pour  
 Over me your concepts,  
 Beacause I just crave to obey your precepts.]<sup>26</sup>

The last work of our survey is the *Alphabet of Jeremiah* (*Alfabeto di Geremia profeta*, 1680<sup>27</sup>), authored by Carmelite Bernardo d'Ascoli, born Giambattista Cruciani. Cruciani's "alphabet" recalls Jeremiah's Book of Lamentations and its acrostic structure. It consists of 22 lessons "to instruct the soul in virtue and perfection":

<sup>26</sup> Cambi, Alfabeto del divino amore, cc. 227v.-228r.

<sup>27</sup> [Giambattista Cruciani] Alfabeto di Geremia profeta, Ridotto dall'Autore in forma di Lettioni, e spiegato con Scritture, Santi Padri, & Eruditioni, Per istruire l'Anima nelle virtù, e perfettione. Dal rev. padre Fr. Bernardo d'Ascoli Carmelitano Riformato del Primo Istituto della Provincia di Monte santo (Roma: Giuseppe Piccini, 1680).

As each of us feel the stubborn war against the three enemies: the World, the Flesh and the Devil, which, using the eleven passions and turning them against us, push us toward the Hell; therefore we desperately need to implore Heaven for its help through our tears, following the advice of prophet Jeremiah. For this purpose this Alphabet is revealed to everyone, to teach you crying good and fruitful tears.

[provando ogn'uno [di noi] l'ostinata guerra con i tre potenti nemici: Mondo, Carne, e Demonio, quali servendosi dell'undici passioni, rivoltandole in nostro danno ci spingono verso l'Inferno; habbiamo perciò necessità molto grande dell'aiuto del Cielo da impetrarsi con lagrime, conforme ne consiglia il S. Maestro Geremia Profeta, che a questo fine si apre a ciascuno quest'Alfabeto per insegnare il buono, e fruttuoso pianto.]<sup>28</sup>

Each lesson is titled after a letter of the Hebrew alphabet:

Lesson I. On letter Aleph. How useful and necessary the prayer is.  
[Lettione I. Sopra la Lettera Aleph. Quanto utile, e necessaria sia l'orazione.]

Lesson II. On letter Beth. How useful and necessary is to know God, and his love.

[Lettione II. Sopra la Lettera Beth. Quanto utile, e necessaria sia la cognizione di Dio, e del suo amore.]

Lesson III. On letter Giteh. How necessary is to know oneself.

[Lettione III. Sopra la Lettera Giteh. Quanto necessaria sia la cognizione di se stesso.]

Furthermore, each lesson is divided into three parts: a Prelude (*Preludio di Geremia all'anima*); the Meditations of the Soul, numbered in 10-15 points (*Meditationi dell'anima*); and a recap in the form of a dialogue between the personified soul and the author (*Colloqui*):

To avoid confusion you must notice (oh Reader) that Preludes are the foundation of the doctrine; other points and conversations provide you each day with some good stuff to meditate and move you to tears.

Per non generare dunque confusione devi notare (o Lettore), che i Preludi serviranno per fondamento della dottrina; gl'altri Punti, e

<sup>28</sup> Cruciani, Alfabeto di Geremia, s.n.

Colloquii per havere in ciaschedun giorno qualche buona materia da meditare per eccitarti al pianto.<sup>29</sup>

This is a massive moral treatise that deployed the Hebrew alphabet to connect the author's moral aim to the mystical tradition of the Old Testament; in the same way, the order of the letters, thus the order of the chapters, represents a gradually in-depth investigation of the life of the soul, and the soul's relation with the divinity. This gradual movement replicates itself in each chapter's construction, as the same sub-theme is expounded four times in four variants: the title, the Prelude that always includes biblical sources, the Meditations that sometimes include literary sources, and finally the dialogues, where the author suggests to the reader a sort of highly detailed soul-searching around the same subject. It is a complex and compendious text and, even though written in Italian, its density and the intricacy of its prose certainly required a well-educated reader with a lot of time to spend on books. The *Alphabet of Jeremiah* is an example of moral literature that, notwithstanding its alleged supreme goals, did not really care to reach a wide audience and persuade them through pleasant matters and rhetorical figures—according to the good old formula *delectare ac docere*.

## 5. FINAL REMARKS

Spiritual alphabets, written in Latin, had spread during the Middle Ages as an aid to prayer and meditation for monks and religious figures. During the 14th and 15th centuries, however, they were adopted outside convents as well, as the ordered layout of their contents met the requirements of new currents of Christian devotion focused on personal religious experience, such as the *devotio moderna* in northern Europe and the Franciscan renewal in Spain. After the outbreak of the Lutheran Reformation, the Roman Church began to oppose this kind of literature, especially when it was addressed to laymen and commoners, as, on the one hand, it could endanger their souls with an excessive accent on autonomy and, on the other, it could trigger further claims for reformation. The Council of Trent, with its decrees ruling devotion and every move of the believers' spiritual life, prompted Catholic authors to retrieve the alphabetical layout for their moral works, abandoning

<sup>29</sup> Cruciani, Alfabeto di Geremia, s.n.

the individual dimension and boasting, instead, standardized devotional practice and compliance with the rituals, as well as complete submission to ecclesiastical supervision.

Italian devotional literature of the 16th and 17th centuries displayed the whole parable of the spiritual alphabets, from works inclined to reformed suggestions, like Valdés's *Alphabeto Christiano*, to the most orthodox and far-from-the-commoners *Alphabet of Jeremiah* by Cruciani, a compendious treatise on the virtues of the soul. Between these extremes, a group of books approached the audience in different ways. Salsi's *Confessional Alphabet* instructed believers in sacramental practices; Ferrini's *Exemplar Alphabet* provided ready-made texts as a source for preachers and writers as well as a repository of enjoyable moral tales for less educated people. Bartolomeo Cambi brought together mystic, moral, profane literature and poetry in his *Alphabet of Divine Love*.

Devotional literature in the form of an alphabet experienced all the changes of taste as to literary style, which mirrored the spiritual orientation of its authors. From Valdés's translator's terse prose to the ornate features of mannerism, already visible in Salsi and Ferrini. Cambi's ingenious embroideries marked the passage to baroque taste, even though poetry, thanks to its rhymes and phonetic figures, remained an accessible genre for moderately educated readers. That did not apply, possibly, to Cruciani's dense prose.

As spiritual alphabets increasingly adopted the stylistic features of elitist literature, therefore, they excluded common believers and illiterate clergymen and turned their pedagogical drive toward the ruling class, as always, but especially towards those people who were going to make up the middle-class. At the same time, they proved remarkably adaptable devices to help memorize concepts, organize information and provide material for creative writing – even though, we know, the flamboyant inventiveness of the baroque period is also considered an answer and reaction to the formal constraints of everyday life, first of all to religious and spiritual life.

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