CHAPTER 7

The Reformation, the Council of Trent and the Divergence of Spiritual Kinship and Godparenthood across Europe: A Long-run Analysis

Guido Alfani

The presence of one or more godparents still remains a requirement at Catholic and Orthodox baptisms. The same is true for almost all versions of the Christian religion related to the Reformation. The Orthodox also continue to believe that the baptismal ceremony creates a specific kind of kinship, called ‘spiritual kinship’, and subsequently establishes impediments to marriage between some of the actors involved in the ceremony. This concept of spiritual kinship does not exist under the Reformation (having being removed by Luther himself) whereas the Catholics renounced it in the course of the 20th century. However evidence suggests that everywhere in Europe, in the Middle Ages as in Early Modern times, godparenthood was mostly used to pursue aims very different from those prescribed by religious teaching, and that the results of religious innovations regarding the celebration of baptisms (particularly, but not exclusively, innovations in the rules of selection of the godparents) were very different from those the reformers hoped for.

This chapter explores how key religious divides, and particularly that created between Catholic and Orthodox at the time of the East-West schism in the 11th century and that created by the Reformation in the 16th century, were also able to create divergence in social structures and social behaviour. The first section briefly reconstructs the emergence, in the East, of the notion of spiritual kinship and its spread to the West, up until, and including, the Reformation and the Catholic Reformation. It also discusses the early developments of godparenthood. The second section provides an overview of the differences between Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant social customs, particularly regarding the selection of godparents and the social and economic role they played in the late Middle Ages and in the Early Modern period. The third section explores the link between godparenthood and family structures, focusing in particular on the selection of godparents as part of household strategies of social alliance.
The chapter makes use of a variety of sources. Conciliar decrees and discussions, diocesan statutes, theological treaties and the like are used to reconstruct the meaning given to spiritual kinship and godparenthood by religious authorities accepting different versions of the Christian faith. Parish books of baptism, family books, sumptuary laws and similar sources provide information about actual practices. The chapter also relies on a growing literature about the history of godparenthood and baptism. As will be shown, such literature suggests that this is a perspective from which to view key historical transformations of the European families in a new light.

1 A Short History of Spiritual Kinship and Godparenthood from the Origins to the Reformation

On the eve of the Reformation, Europeans – be they Catholic or Orthodox – believed that the baptismal rite conferred new ties of kinship on the people involved in the ceremony. This was known as ‘spiritual kinship’, and was accompanied by an impediment to marriage between all those who were tied by it. As will be seen, the extension of spiritual kinship (the number and kind of people among which it was established) changed between East (Orthodox) and West (Catholic) and also changed in time, but by the fifteenth century it involved all the key actors of the baptism (the baptized, his or her parents, the godparents and the person officiating – usually, a priest).

The origin of the notion of spiritual kinship dates back to the first centuries of the Christian era. It appeared more or less as the same time as the other social and religious institution considered in this chapter, godparenthood, but it can also be noticed that the latter had antecedents in the ‘sponsorship’ practice used by the early Christians. In this section, the historical developments of godparenthood and spiritual kinship from the late Antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages will be synthetically reconstructed, paying particular attention to the reciprocal influences between the Eastern and Western Churches.

1 For an updated synthesis of such literature, see Guido Alfani and Vincent Gourdon (eds.), Spiritual Kinship in Europe, 1500–1900 (London, 2012). More particularly about the history of baptism, Guido Alfani, Philippe Castagnetti and Vincent Gourdon (eds.), Baptiser: pratique sacramentelle, pratique sociale (St Etienne, 2009).

2 For a fuller reconstruction, see Joseph H. Lynch, Godparents and Kinship in Early Medieval Europe (Princeton, 1986); Guido Alfani, Fathers and Godfathers. Spiritual Kinship in Early Modern Italy (Aldershot, 2009); Guido Alfani and Vincent Gourdon, “Spiritual Kinship