

Religion and Identity: Families of Italian Origin in the Nottingham Area, UK

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Abstract

Religion can represent a very significant element among the ones contributing to the construction of ethnic/cultural identity of families from an immigrant background. This is even more relevant when 'institutionalised' religion, in the form of a religious Mission, becomes the main channel for the socialisation and intergenerational identity transmission among families of immigrant origin. The article focuses on the role of the Catholic Mission for families of Italian origin living in the Nottingham area, UK.

Keywords: Italian, Mission, identity, family, invisibility.

Introduction

For people from a minority ethnic background religious identification can represent a very significant element contributing to the process of identity formation. In the process of ethnic identity construction, religion is particularly relevant as it is tied up with many other aspects, such as: language, activities, ritual dishes and numerous other cultural aspects.

The present article derives from a wider doctoral investigation on intergenerational identity transmission among ten three-generation families of Italian origin. It focuses especially on the role of religion as a means for the transmission of moral values and cultural identity across generations of Italians living in the Nottingham area (UK). More specifically, it describes and examines the fundamental role played by the Italian Catholic Mission of Nottingham in the reinforcement of the feeling of identity for the Italian community of the city. Within this particular context, cultural and reli-

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gious centres, which are often at the centre of the 'ethnic' life of many immigrants, seems to play a special role.

Religion and para-religious practices are particularly relevant for the identification processes of both the younger and older generations of Italians living in the UK as, being culturally specific, they are useful to differentiate them from other Christians. As the process of identity building takes place in oppositional terms (Fortier 2000, Remotti 1996) - in other words in the presence of the 'other' - immigrants from Italy living in the United Kingdom tend to conceive themselves - and to be constructed - as Catholics, mainly because they live in a dominantly Protestant land. To differentiate themselves from the host group and other minority groups, given their general *invisibility*, Italian immigrants in the UK need to hold on to *non-material* boundary-marks. As observed by Smolicz (1992: 117) 'it is the core values of culture - be it language, religion, family structure or some other aspect of heritage - that act as the hallmark of a particular ethnic group and confer upon it *authentic* ethnic identity'. In this sense, Catholicism assumes a special significance as one of the most relevant elements of differentiation and, therefore, identification.

Although the importance of religion in the destination country is unquestionable, studies focusing on religiosity within the Italian diaspora are still scarce and refer specifically to contexts other than the British (Paganoni and O'Connor 1999; Varacalli *et al.* 1999). This phenomenon is probably due to the fact that in Great Britain, Catholicism has neither been considered as a creed to be understood nor, for many years now, as a threat to the stability of the country.

Religion and migration

Moving to a new country to live and work in a new environment can cause some migrants a considerable amount of stress and anxiety. If they are believers, religious observance might provide some comfort and the church might represent a reassuring known haven. As underlined by Giddens (1991: 181), 'adherence to a clear-cut faith - especially one which

offers a comprehensive lifestyle - may diminish such anxieties'².

In this context, it is important to point out the relationship between personal and institutional religion. Personal faith is a very private aspect of any religion. Nevertheless, it is often combined with social and cultural elements linked to religion as an institution or as a social moment: attendance at religious services, vigils, pilgrimages, etc. It is when this combination takes place, the boundary between religion and socio-cultural expressions can become blurred.

From a social viewpoint, religion can strengthen the individuals' allegiance to the group of origin, through its legitimisation of many aspects of their common culture. The fact that religion is an expression of commonality, cohesion and equality among people who share the same faith, invests it with an important role in the inter-generational transmission of culture and ethnic identity. It is for this reason, in fact, that religion is often used as an instrument for the transmission of culture and the affirmation of ethnic identity (Chong 1998; Dumont 2003; Williams 1988). Religious practices, family traditions and ritual dishes represent symbols of ethnic identity. Along with the cultural aspects of religion, language is also transmitted: symptomatic of this are, for example, religious services in the native language of the community.

Institutional religion: the Mission.

A Mission is a religious organisation's section located abroad with the objectives of propagation of its faith and/or carrying out humanitarian work. The presence of religious Missions and missionary priests is usually associated with remote areas of Africa or South America. In this article, I focus on a Scalabrinian Mission. The founder of this Congregation of Missionary priests was the Italian Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini (1839-1905). His intention was to create a structure that could meet the needs - pastoral and practical -

² Although Giddens' idea is linked to the apprehension that modernity could induce, I find that it is possible to apply the concept to the case of the Italians immigrants of Nottingham. Moreover, spirituality is one of the ways for individuals to attempt to find an identity (Jenkins 1996).

of migrants both in their country of origin and in their place of destination. In the UK, Catholic missions were the first institutions to help the post-war Italian communities. In the United Kingdom, Scalabrinian missionaries established the first centre in London in 1951³. Several others followed to serve for Italians living in other large cities. Nottingham Mission was established in 1958 (Marin 1975: 145). Since the 1960s, several associations, clubs and services have appeared in Nottingham serving the Italian community. Many of them have had meetings at the premises of the Italian Mission of Vivian Avenue: the *patronato* ACLI (*Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani*)⁴, social, youth and sports clubs, a nursery school, supervised study after school hours, catechism - all services and activities established exclusively for the immigrants' use. As ascertained from the results of extensive fieldwork and interviews with Italian post-war immigrants and their families in Nottingham, it is possible to affirm that the Mission represented the religious and social backbone of the Italian community of Nottingham.

Providing a place for the expression of faith, ethnic churches are also *loci* where allegiance to a place of origin is reproduced and where it is possible to meet people with similar viewpoints on everyday life (Fortier 2000: 110). People attending the same place, although dissimilar in certain individual characteristics, may have many things in common, which often inevitably lead to social exchange and reciprocity among them. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the social organisation within the church operated on two levels: 1) by providing psychological support to the new-comers, and 2) by meeting their most common practical needs upon arrival, such as finding accommodation, assist-

³ An Italian ethnic church, St Peter, was established in London in 1835, which, as suggested by Colpi (1990: 231), was soon deeply influenced by the religiosity of Irish immigrants. The Italian Catholic mission, founded in London a century later, was created specifically in order to provide services and spiritual comfort for the Italian immigrant community.

⁴ The ACLI (Association of Italian Christian Workers) branch of Nottingham was the first one to open in 1966 (Marin 1975: 140).

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ing migrants with paper-work and helping them with the health service.

For most Italians, the Mission of Nottingham and the Italian Club represented both a religious and a social point of reference. Through time these various functions became so interconnected that the building in Vivian Avenue ended up being referred to simply as 'the Club'⁵. The Mission and the Club soon became very important for those immigrants who were looking for assistance and comfort, a surrogate of the extended family they had left in their country of origin. Because parties, festivals and anniversaries all took place at the premises of the Mission, they contributed to the transformation of the Mission into a place of socialisation for immigrant families. Moreover, the simple fact that all these events took place in that particular venue gave further legitimisation to them. It also provided the opportunity for socially approved cultural reproduction and allowed a certain social recognition within the community itself, as well as providing a source for cultural identity.

The Mission was also the place for young people to meet and develop sentimental relationship. This was often encouraged by some parents who attempted to defend the Italian 'character' through a direct influence on their children's marital choices. This led to a relatively high level of intra-marriage among the children of the immigrants.

Riccardo⁶ (second generation) [Family 1]: *We saw each other on the street, but we met at the Italian Centre ... the place where the Italians met in Nottingham.*

Marina (second generation): *My parents knew his parents, my friends were his friends.*

As observed during the fieldwork, situations of this kind were quite frequent within the community. Indeed, as a result of a wedding taking place within the community, immi-

⁵ The expression 'the Club' refers, in the common discourse, to both the premises of 2 Vivian Avenue, where the Italians used to meet, and the Italians taking part in the meetings.

⁶ All names reported in this article are pseudonyms.

grants develop their relationships into more symbolically significant ones: from mere compatriots, they become *in-laws*, now bound to each other by their newly developed fictive kinship. Another interesting aspect is that families attributed a functional role to some traditional Catholic values. Among these, certain religious principles can provide a ready-made code of practice for the new generations in relation to long-established norms of conduct, such as obligations to parents or male-female relationships, which are often presented as opposed to the laxity of the values of mainstream society. The role of Catholicism as a channel for the transmission of traditional ideas and values cannot be disregarded in the study of inter-generational transmission among families of Italian origin, as the Christian Catholic identity has always been considered as one of the inherent characteristics of 'being Italian'⁷.

The Italian Mission and Club in Nottingham represented crucial settings for the inter-generational transmission of values and identity. Ironically, however, these religion-oriented settings were also, to a certain degree, a space for inter-generational tension. The strict Catholic rules of behaviour - especially towards the younger generations and women - appear to be well suited to the older generation's conservative stance towards life. Therefore, reference to religion is a safer way for them to legitimate certain forms of severity towards the moral conduct of younger people.

⁷ This tendency is generally true, although it is now much less justifiable than in the past, due to the variety of faiths professed in the country and the high number of conversions of Italian citizens to other confessions. Moreover, according to Godio (2001), a member of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), in 1999 40% were believers who attended religious functions regularly, while another 40% declared themselves to be believers but had issues with the church as an institution or with its representatives. Only 6% affirmed to be atheistic, while the rest of the population divides its loyalties among more than six hundred other creeds and sects. Other data provided by Foster (1999: 69) show that regular church attendance has dropped in Italy by 40% in the thirty years between 1950 and 1980, in connection with an increase in secularism. For details on the 'Internal Competition in a National Religious Monopoly', see Diotallevi 2002.

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The fieldwork, on which this study is based, took place during a period when the Mission was closing down entailing an end to all linked activities. For most Italians in Nottingham, this was a loss of a very specific reference point. As suggested by one of the interviewees, the Mission was the *fulcrum* around which the entire social life of the Italian community in Nottingham once turned:

Piera (first generation) [Family 10]: *We were all close-knit once. I don't know what's happening to our community but we were all close. If Father Giuseppe [the missionary priest] needed some help we were all there. We were getting all well together: first communion, catechism, the nuns were doing the catechism ... everything! It went to pieces ... our community.*

With regard to Sunday school, almost all the children of the Italian immigrants had to attend it in preparation for their first communion. An interesting aspect is the fact that some of them associate attendance at catechism not with religious instruction but mainly with language learning, as the buildings related to the church were the sites in which the 'official Italian' language was spoken.

Donato (2) [Family 7]: *I went to the Sunday school for a few years up until I was about eleven [years old]. So between, let's say, 6 and 11. It was mainly obviously orientated over, you know, stories of Jesus, and this sort of thing, but it was all in Italian.*

The attendance at catechism therefore had a double function for many children, both of preparing them for the reception of new sacraments and, at the same time, instructing them in the language of the country of family origin, the main language spoken in the buildings of the mission.

With the closure of the Mission, for the first time in many years, many Italians felt the necessity to redefine themselves independently from this institution. Many traditional values and principles might have been shared and legitimised among Italians by the existence of the Mission, which stood as an institutional 'piece of Italy' within reach. The sudden

disappearance of it has left parents and grandparents of Italian origin with a greater responsibility of transmitting such values to following generations.

Concluding remarks

In this article I have examined the role of the Mission, the Club and the ethnic church in the construction and reinforcement of feeling of Italian-ness for Italian immigrants in Nottingham. Church and Club attendance had maintained a special significance for the Italian community of the Nottingham area for at least four decades. From 1958, the year of the foundation of the Italian Catholic Mission in Nottingham, to the beginning of 2002, the year in which it was closed down, the Mission had worked as a religious, moral and social point of reference for most Italians in the area.

Through the participation to the several activities organised within the Mission, younger generations of Italians became socialised and grew up into culturally accepted and shared values. Most of the children and grandchildren of the Italian immigrants of Nottingham had taken advantage of the activities, language courses, and trips organised by the Mission and the Italian consulate. The recent closure of the centre, however, will most likely force parents and grandparents to find out ways to keep the new generations in contact with traditional Italian language and culture. The centre provided both formal and informal routes for this: how such contact will take place in the future is not yet clear. Indeed, the disappearance of the Mission raises some questions about the future of Italians in the city and the potential ways for transmission of culture through the generations.

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